Following

(2025 posts)

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These are the posts from my blog *Following* (https://blog.10v24.net/following) released in 2025. I made two versions, PDF and EPUB.

This book is a snapshot of the blog as it was on 31 December 2025 (after releasing the last blog post of the year).

This is version 1.0, released 14 January 2026.

MSL Interpretations of Holidays

05 February 2025

MSL, being as it is a minimalist, ahistorical religion, perhaps should not have any holidays of its own. However, I think in many or most cases, a meaningful MSLian interpretation of existing holidays may be produced.

Some examples:

New Year's Day: A mathematical holiday (based on a counting system), perhaps suggests philosophy and thus MSL. New Year's Day may be celebrated by many countries despite their different cultures. New Year's Day is about taking stock and intending to do better (VMH?). It's about simplicity (MSL/VMH) (at least in the tradition of eating black-eyed peas and rice). It's about looking to the future (VMH?).

Valentine's Day: An MSLian parent might communicate to their old-enough children that Valentine's Day is about romance: finding special people and finding them special, and about being friends with people, particularly of the opposite sex. These are good things. But romance also brings sexual desire, often to the point of lust, which is a bad thing -- maybe sometimes with some good results, but inherently bad. Also we can desire people in ways more "emotional" than "sexual" in a lustful way. Also, finding someone special could turn that person into a replacement for God to us. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. If it does, that's a bad thing. So romance is a mixed thing, something potentially dangerous, bad, healthy, and good all at the same time. And often actually bad in some ways when it's good in others. (This discussion helps explain MSL's view on sexuality. Maybe something like it is a good thing to meditate on, when you're an adult.)

Passover: thinking about slavery and getting out of it. Slavery to sin, slavery to people who sin, slavery to thought systems, slavery to people who favor sin and messed-up thought systems. The Exodus account is good to think about and apply to your life. Maybe commemorate past passages out of slavery, in your own life. For me, I had a dark time in life, getting out of psychological debt to various people I took on to try to help me with my work. At one point, I thought eating turmeric and black pepper would help me recover. I don't know either way if it does, and I don't eat it anymore. But

for a while I ate it regularly. So maybe on Passover, I'll eat it again, to remember.

Good Friday: meditation on the cross -- altruistic self-risking. Also the idea of atonement, of a sacrifice that makes things right between people / with God.

Easter: meditation on recovery from the cross. Also on the Resurrection / Millennium.

Day of Atonement: think of what you've done wrong, resolve to change. Actually change on that day if you can.

Halloween: meditation on supernatural evil and spiritual warfare.

Thanksgiving: a "protestant" way to read this holiday is to think of poverty and alienation, rather than its fullness and family. (Similar to the somewhat "protestant", protesting, response to Valentine's Day above.) Fullness is a dangerous idea, and family as well if "family" conveys "there is no way you will ever be not accepted". My gratefulness is my valuing of my own well-being -- probably OK if my life is hard, maybe not OK if my life isn't so hard and my gratitude blinds me to the neediness of the universe. Going with the grain of Thanksgiving could involve a careful appreciation of one's own well-being and one's family, mixed with the protestant view. Remember that it's important to hunger when God hungers.

Christmas: meditation on kenosis and incarnation.

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This list is from an American perspective. The examples are Western, common in America, some secular, others Christian, some Jewish. These are some that I know or know something about. But there are many others, like smaller American holidays (Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, President's Day, Labor Day, Veteran's Day, Memorial Day), smaller Christian holidays (All Saints' Day, Día de los Muertos, various saints' days, Advent, Lent, Reformation Day, etc.), non-Western religious holidays (e.g. Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, Buddha's Birthday), or ethnic holidays (that is, of a people group, but not America overall) (like various non-Western New Years, Kwanzaa). I will leave these for now, but probably with some thinking, one could see an MSLian interpretation for them as well.

Precious in a Human Way

05 February 2025

Human beings get really involved in the little signals they fesend, or don't send, the little ways they wrong each other or do the right thing, the little honorings and disrespectings they do to each other. They built up the morality of interpersonal relationships into something intense and punishing.

Yet, at the same time, someone is starving to death, or dying of malaria, and the natural, intense interpersonal

morality of you vs. me does fairly little to help them, thought it takes up so much attention and energy, and causes so much pain.

People value each other using the flesh of their own brains, a human valuing. They intensify this valuing because it would look bad if they didn't value them. (They also value their own well-being because it would look bad if they didn't.) But we can also value each other according to the principles of what matters most: whether people make it to heaven.

Probably the most consequential thing you can do to help someone go to heaven someday is to offer the truth about salvation, in such a way that they can trust it. Or, to help someone else do that for you. The truth helps people process their lives so that what comes to them helps them to move in the right direction. Generally speaking, the more years they have with that lens, the better.

(Caring for those who starve or die of preventable disease, mentioned earlier, is something that follows from caring about people the way God does, which follows from the truth about salvation. We give people more time to develop spiritually, which they may need in this life. Also, we are often, or generally, part-atheist, and thus see this life as the only one. So to have God's heart in our atheistic mindset is to value people's life in this life.)

It's true that concern over even small sins makes sense if we are concerned about ourselves or other people going to heaven. If we really care the way God cares, sometimes

that's what we should focus on. But there's a different energy to God's care, compared to our human care, even about the same issues.

If we can disconnect from the human kind of valuing, we may feel a great relief. Then we are free to use our free minds and free wills to *ourselves* care the way God cares, rather than being compelled by human instinct.

When to Stop Thinking You're Poor

05 February 2025

If you start out poor, you adopt the social burden and social privilege of being poor. The burden might be that people look at you as lazy, criminal, or some other negative epithet. The privilege is that you don't have to have the social burden of being wealthy. Wealthy people are responsible for all the things they don't do to help other people, perhaps among other things.

If you start out poor, naturally you might seek to become more wealthy, and you might succeed. As you become wealthy, you might naturally enough enjoy the benefits of being seen as a respectable citizen. But when will you start to adopt the social burden of being wealthy? There may not be a nice, clean line between being poor and being wealthy. You sort of have to stumble on the new identity, perhaps at an awkward moment.

It's similar with growing up. When are you really an adult, to be "tried as an adult"? While there might be watersheds you can discern in hindsight, or moments of initiation, largely, adulthood sneaks up on you. And if you do not think of it, you may never really adopt the identity of adulthood, with its burdens and vision.

It's also similar with illness -- when are you well, and now you need to bear the burdens a well person must bear? Or with burnout, when have you recovered enough from burnout that you can go run another race?

Becoming Beautiful and Good

02 March 2025

People are struck by the loveliness of those who become more spiritually mature (I think this is a theme in Tim (and Kathy) Keller's *The Meaning of Marriage*). "Loveliness": a beautiful appearance in the eyes of humans.

People who are beautiful in this way tend to be somewhat good. But they are not necessarily good people. They may fail to have the heart of God. They may not be consumed with the concern for the eternal well-being of those around them, or the alleviation of the worst forms of temporal illness.

Beautiful people fit in and receive praise. Everybody likes a beautiful person, and they are easy to love. Really good people don't fit in in this world, and receive enmity. Some people like really good people, and some don't. Really good people are sometimes easy to love, and sometimes not.

Fear, Respect, Harm

02 March 2025

Respect can come out of fear:

1. You respect the thing that can beat you up.

2. You respect what you value, what you fear damaging.

Respecting is seeing worth in something. Are things that can beat you up really worthy, just because they can beat you up? There are two different meanings of "respect" in 1) and 2).

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Fear can come out of respect:

3. What you respect, you may feel awe toward, and the awe is like fear.

Possession by an Idea, Possession by a Spirit

02 March 2025

Let's say someone you love and have been parted from for five years is going to visit you. You think of them coming and feel excited. This excitement makes you energized, and makes you slightly obsessed over how to prepare. The obsession to prepare drives you to go to the corner store, buy some tea, go to the department store, buy extra bedding for the couch in the living room, go to the home goods store, buy some decorations for your living room, get the alternative weekly, look up events to do during the time your guest is coming.

So the idea of them coming gets you to do things that fit the idea's content and implicit plan, that you will be prepared to receive them. The idea's psychic energy gives you strength, like it's part of your bloodstream. You become an embodiment of the idea of them arriving at the place you live. In fact, when you give yourself over to the idea, when it drives your behavior completely, you are that idea. Either you have given up your self, or your self is identical with it.

Similarly, when an evil spirit comes over you, and you act on its impulses, you become that evil spirit. Or is it really you? If in your heart you don't approve of what the spirit is doing with your body, then no. But if you approve of

your own evil spirit, then you are an evil spirit. So when a demon acts through you, if you approve of what it does, you are a demon. If "what you are" (your flesh and behavior) is demonic and "who you are" (your heart) is demonic, then you are nothing but a demon. Either you have given up your self, or your self is identical with it.

A method of anti-temptation is to embody a holy spirit or idea, or even to become it sometimes.

When we give ourselves over to an idea or spirit, the spirits tend to leave us after a while, allowing us the chance to exercise free will.

Risk and Considerateness

02 March 2025

On a walk, I saw up ahead a house with three unleashed dogs in the yard and two owners, who seemed to want to get the dogs to get in the owners' car. Two dogs complied, and one paused to smell a plant for a while. I was approaching during this time.

I approached cautiously, not knowing these dogs. They didn't seem aggressive, but you never know. They might have become aware of me and wanted to drive me away from their territory. I was on the opposite side of the street. Once having approached me, they might have gotten distracted by their new physical location and started to run away from the owners' house.

I passed, and nothing came of it.

Why were these dogs unleashed? Presumably because the owners thought that the 15 or 20 feet from their front door to their car wasn't that far. Too much trouble, leashing their three dogs.

From the owners' perspective, what were their benefits and risks of their unleashed dogs? Benefits: their dogs' canine affections. The benefit of not bothering to leash a dog -- a small act in itself, but perhaps they were tired of dealing with details. Risks: a dog running away, a dog intimidating a person, a dog biting a human -- that dog perhaps needing to be put down.

I can understand what the owners did from their perspective. I myself have to balance risk and benefit, a task for which there doesn't seem to always be a manual, and to the extent that there is, it's tiring to read it.

From my perspective, what were the benefits and risks of their unleashed dog? Benefits: not much, maybe none. Risks: being intimidated by a dog, being bit by a dog, having to manage my approach so that the dogs wouldn't approach me and maybe run away.

Maybe they didn't think of people like me when they decided not to leash their dogs.

From a practical-minded perspective, we could say that if you are having trouble weighing risks and benefits, consider if there are third parties who might have to take on externalities of your risk-benefit decision. If it's unclear

how to balance risk and benefit from your own perspective, consider their perspective. Maybe for them they only get risks, (or even, only get benefits), clarifying your decision.

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I like this basic principle, but I'm ambivalent about the example given. On the one hand, I think it's good to be on the side of not harming humans and dogs. On the other hand, there can be worse things than dog bites, or dogs having to be put down, or getting hit by a car while wandering away from home, or any other kind of temporal harm. If we think doing the right thing means "being responsible so that people (or animals) don't suffer in this life", then we could eliminate parts of life that help people avoid suffering after this life, things that help them live forever. The temporal harm is concrete, and we'll be held accountable for it by other people. But the eternal harm, or risk, may not be as palpable to us. (Not as true if we train our intuitions on the belief that eternal harm is possible, and that things like an anti-ethical orientation, a lack of moral excellence, etc. lead to that.)

So I would say that the example above may be misleading for being too temporal. Not that temporal harm doesn't matter, instrumentally and inherently, but because it's not the most important problem in the end, inherently.

Ultimately, determining what is right and wrong, specifically, involves looking at the whole of a situation and relying on our intuition to trade off risks, given the

unknown. This applies when all we consider is temporal harm, and perhaps even more so when considering eternal harm. A lot of times, we're wrapped up in protecting ourselves so that we can live our lives (true both of temporal and eternal altruists). That's the risk-benefit calculation we perform by default. But we might clarify that decision by considering other people's well-being, both from a temporal and an eternal perspective.

The Jobless Care for the Whole World

02 March 2025

When you have a job, it biases you toward your profession's worldview. Mental health professionals are biased toward psychological well-being in the here and now. Pastors are biased toward well-being through church community. Police are biased toward seeing people as threats, and toward a world where they protect the innocent. College professors are biased toward seeing the solution to the world's problems coming through formal education. Professions cause you to see a narrow slice of reality, hyperfixate on it, grow numb to it, and become traumatized by it.

Jobs constrain your thinking for 40+ hours a week. Jobs pay your bills. Don't bite the hand that feeds you. Don't see or say what would be bad for you.

Who are those who can care for the whole world, without this intense bias? The jobless.

Has the Finite Person Died Yet?

09 March 2025

In MSL, there is one most pivotal decision in all of reality, which is whether God will be good, or whether he will harden himself against being good. If God hardens himself against being good, then good itself ceases to be valid and everything ceases to be valid enough to exist. To be good requires that you be willing to give up everything for the good, including your very existence. And for Legitimacy, the Law, who is personal, to itself be valid, if possible it must bear the burdens of those it is the law over.

The Finite person of Legitimacy is the one who makes that decision, because he can be tempted, and because he can die, like we can. He can be in the position where death looks like the end of existence. If he can be willing to die, he can be willing to give everything he has to what is good. An important question: has he done this already? If so, then we don't have to worry about him coming and failing the test. If not, then maybe we would worry.

Biblical Christianity avoids this potential worry by asserting that it knows that Jesus (who would be the Finite person if both MSL and the Bible are true) already came

and died. But for MSLians who don't trust the Bible enough to think that Jesus already came and died, what then?

One thing to say is that maybe life is liveable without knowing the answer. I don't think that means "completely ignore the fact that maybe the Finite person hasn't died yet and thus everything could cease to exist"; to have no sense, at any time, of the tension that reality is under, Legitimacy not having fully been validated. But it is something that we don't have much ability to do things about. So maybe it's best not to let it overwhelm us. Secular people believe that this life is the only one, so death is the end, potentially a depressing thought. Yet they go about their lives almost as though they aren't going to die. It could be similar for MSLians thinking about the possibility that all existence could cease.

That's a baseline, in case it's impossible to reduce uncertainty anymore.

It sort of makes sense that God wouldn't tell us about the terrible decision, of Legitimacy facing the choice of the cross, until after it was too late for us to mess it up. (Or, too late for evil beings to mess it up.) In a sense, the Finite person may be the only one who could mess it up, because it's his decision, but I'm not sure about that 100%. Maybe like us he needs to be tempted and anti-tempted to develop to the point of ethical maturity, such that he can make the right decision. So maybe God would keep the plan hidden until after the Finite person's death, and since we know

about the plan, we can assume the death already happened.

Another thought is that the usual Christian idea that Jesus had to die on earth, in history, is both true and overstated. In other words, the way that I see Jesus is by using my imaginal and noetic senses to see him in the spiritual world. You can see him there too, right now, just by thinking of him. There he is, being tempted at Gethsemane, and yet simultaneously from the rememberer's perspective, but earlier in his life, walking to Bethany or casting out a demon. This story exists independent of human history, and could easily have existed even before the first human sin. (The resonances between this spiritual world and human history that exist being caused by God conforming human history to fit the image of this spiritual world.)

In that case, anyone can verify that the Finite Person has already died, simply by seeing that Jesus fits the bill of "Finite Person" and this Jesus can be seen clearly by simply observing the imaginal and noetic worlds pointed to by the Bible.

But I don't quite think a non-Biblical MSLian would be satisfied by that idea. At the very least, some doubt would be left.

Another thought is that it would be more responsible of God to have the Finite person live a finite life, overcoming the temptation to not die, before creation. (If the Finite person fails, then we all cease to exist, so maybe then

nothing matters. Yet, we struggle and sacrifice for the future, and it could be seen as unfair to us to not secure that.) Then, maybe the Finite Person would be tested in an experience machine, sufficient to have really borne the burdens of finite life, having chosen to give up everything for the good. Having passed the test, then God would have the confidence to create us. What the finite person's life would look like might even vary based on culture. Jesus may be what the Finite Person looks like to Christians, or to Earthlings. (If there are extraterrestrial intelligences, the image they access in the imaginal, noetic, spiritual world may be of the "face" of the Finite Person conforming to their biology and history. Perhaps the Finite Person successively lives finite lives, so that he has lived the life of Jesus, and of a certain mythic and real being seen in the culture of the orbiters of a distant star. But in every culture, there would be some things the same about the story, of sinlessness, bearing burdens, and giving up everything for what is good, if nothing else.)

I feel like the solution of, Finite Person lives a finite life or lives that as far as he can tell is as real as our finite lives, though it is in an experience machine, and lives this before any of us are created, is possible, and probably what it would make sense for God to do. Would it even be responsible for God to create us without knowing himself? It seems doubtful. In a way, God does not fully become himself, Legitimacy does not fully become itself, until the Finite Person is tested. Could God allow himself to create

if his goodness was only provisional? Maybe not. Maybe he would have to figure himself out before going on.

Would it then make sense for this narrative to have preceded the creation of anything? It seems like some sort of being would have to exist in order to pioneer evil and temptation so that it could be imagined in the experience machine, and to tempt the Finite Person.

From the perspective of MSL, it's conceivable that God could not anticipate evil until it arose, produced by beings who freely chose to be evil. Maybe there was only one such being at first. In that moment of seeing evil (perhaps most radically a kind of anti-ethical tendency?), God could extrapolate a lot more of human history (or of the history of other finite personal beings). (Perhaps if God is unable to think of evil that hasn't been innovated by a non-divine being, he tests the initial evil being in an experience machine of its own, where it is able to innovate all possible categories of sin, perhaps thinking that its simulated world is real, and thus that its evil is having full effect.) Perhaps at this moment, God negotiated with this first evil being to will all subsequent temptation. And then God and this one evil being (this singular Satan?) put Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection (and the Finite Person through whatever other lives he led).

This last idea (of the Finite person being tempted and dying before the creation of almost all other beings, and this being something God would put into action in order to be responsible and/or to really become himself) seems

fairly satisfying to me as an explanation, and so I will say it's my first preference for explaining whether the Finite person has died yet.

Holiness and Rest

09 March 2025

Trust and care can easily be compatible. But we sometimes use "trust" to mean "trusting and not caring". A negative word for "trusting and not caring" is being "careless", while a positive word could be being "carefree". Or, a more religious word for being carefree might be to be "resting".

If we need to have the heart of God in order to be saved, then we need to care. In the Bible, people were given six days to practice caring, and one day to practice resting. While the Bible doesn't have to be normative in every way for MSLians, and perhaps Christians don't think the number of days of work have to literally be six, this gives some idea that rest and care are supposed to alternate, and that there probably should be more time of care than of rest. However, like in the Bible, in MSL there is the idea that after all the work of existence is done (after everyone who will become holy has become holy), then all of existence will rest. There will be no more risk and evil to bear in mind, so the truth-aligned thing will be to not bear it.

It feels good to go to heaven for a bit, and to let go of the burden of caring. It's dangerous to stay there forever when there's work that needs to be done.

In a state of rest, a foretaste of heaven, you can be clothed with a holy spirit, which prevents you from sinning. So this is a form of holiness. But if your heart underneath isn't good, when this spirit is removed, you'll sin again. It's possible to receive the holy spirit (Christians might say "the Holy Spirit") for years, and other people, and even you, might see you as a good person. But your heart needs to be revealed so that you can be tempted and reject whatever sins are in it. So the spirit may be taken away, and you, and other people, might not recognize you, as you act on your real heart. So it can be good to be wary of a good feeling and good behavior, not that they are bad things in themselves, but because they might not really be you.

However, a good-hearted person will desire to be a good home for the holy spirit, and want to behave well, empowered by the spirit, as the spirit also wants them to, because good behavior makes the world better. And rest is a way to invite in that spirit.

Resting helps people have the strength to care, and also allows them to end chapters of their lives and start new ones. Sleep (speaking physically) allows the mind to process the day, and times of rest allow people to make sense of the past.

Work and care are naturally self-limiting. Too much of them is painful and wearying. But rest is not as much self-limiting. Perhaps it can be boring, but if it's not, it can be enjoyed "forever".

Most people are exposed to the need to work and care, because life is dangerous. They might want to rest all the time, having turned against work and care from over-exposure to them. But if life really did become easy, and such people still really needed work and care to become holy, the danger of resting indefinitely might be one they couldn't see through.

Charisma is the promise of rest. Or, you could say, charisma is a vacation. Rest is the mind not thinking. Not thinking lets anything happen. Normally we say 2 + 2 = 4, but when we rest, 2 + 2 could equal anything, as far as we're concerned. That's what "trust" means. But in the real world, not everything that is trust-producing is actually trustworthy. So to rest is a risky thing, even if, and especially because, what makes it virtuous is that it tells you to disregard risk to at least some degree.

Charisma gives people the power to do whatever they want, without being checked. Pathological rest culture is a way to allow Satan to rule us.

Sexual and romantic thoughts and feelings can be a "vacation". Perhaps the desire for nice things of any sort can be. Sinful thoughts can be a relief -- and be as sinful as they ever were. If you can't rest in a good way, perhaps

you will seek rest from bad sources of rest. Maybe giving in to an addiction is always a seeking of rest.

I fear somewhat that my own writing style is often too much one of rest and not of care. The good side of this is that those who seek rest may like it. What I have to tell them, overwhelmingly, is to care, spend the "six days" of life in caring, and only "one day" in resting. But the bad side is that that writing style (and also speaking style) can put people in a state of rest. And when they rest, 2 + 2 no longer has to add up to anything in particular. I want the "math" of my writing to have effect, so that something "follows" from it. But if the writing voice says "rest", that may be all you hear, and the "math" may no longer be able to work to show you the truth.

Having read this, if this bothers you, you can now discipline yourself to try not to let the voice overrule the "math", when you read "restful" writing.

"Response to Bentham's Bulldog's 'Why I'm Not A Christian'"

18 April 2025

Introduction / Overview

Bentham's Bulldog wrote a post where he explains why Christianity does not convince him. But at the end he asked for longform explanations of why Christianity is true. I have been looking for a way to explain my writing more broadly, and will take this opportunity to enter the discourse.

Generally, I consider myself a Christian. I have a complicated relationship with Christian identity, but I think from the perspective of evaluating theological positions I'm clearly more Christian than Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, and while in some ways I lean more Jewish than what seems to be mainstream Christianity, my metaphysical views are more Christian, which could be easily be interpreted as me being a kind of Christian. My Christianity is more founded in philosophy and I am not a "sola scriptura" or tradition-based person. Yet, I think I can re-approach a fairly theologically conservative Christianity anyway. So I will try to explain this here.

I would recommend reading my booklet MSL first which explains why I believe in God at all and contains a discussion of some of this. It's 24 pages long.

Trinity

Here is an explanation of why I believe in something that could be called a Trinity:

Being is that something ought to be. That something ought to be, itself has to ought to be.

God is an agreement. Agreements are made of congruent wills. These congruent wills are or necessarily are parts of persons. The agreement is on what ought to be. The agreement itself has to ought to be. An agreement is made of one or more persons. It consists of persons.

What ought to be should be prioritized highest. Thus a person ought to be willing to give up everything for it. If it's possible for God (the agreement) to give up everything, including life, for what's good, it has to be done in order for the agreement to be valid. One person of God has to be conscious of everything and thus can't die. But if there is another who is finite, he can die. And he must exist so that God (the agreement, and thus all its persons) can exist.

All of the terms of the agreement, of what morality is and thus generally what is expected of all personal beings (except what are foundational aspects of the nature of personal beings, which were always inherent in the persons of God) are decided on by these two beings. But one more being is present, who is the "overlap" between the two (see the MSL booklet linked above). These are those who decided on how reality is set up, prior to the free will of their creatures, and who decide that there are creatures, and they have a unique status as creators. However, the agreement which is God can expand to include any being who is 100% in agreement with it. We

are all becoming like that -- never to become the creator of the universe, but coming into tune (unless we refuse to). I don't believe in infinity (this is not a position I have completely explored, but I feel like at least finitude is clearly real, and infinity might not be). So then I think that there are only a finite number of personal beings who could ever exist, and thus the number of "agreers", large though one would hope it will be, is finite.

One advantage to believing in the Trinity (or something sufficiently like it) is that the Trinity allows it to be the case that God was a man who died (yet the universe didn't cease, as would happen if the Father died). The Father in his omniscience experiences what we experience, but the Son lived a human life without simultaneously experiencing everything else, which is our situation. A God who lives a life like ours and dies is different, I think in a better way, than a God who doesn't.

Thinking in the tradition of Anselm, who says that God is the being who is the greatest who can be conceived, I would say that this willingness to undergo what you make other people undergo is a more fundamentally "great-making" property of God than omniscience or omnipotence. In my philosophical theology, the very root of being itself is in that it ought to be, and it ought to be because God is willing to undergo a life like ours and will do what it takes to undergo that if possible. Another "great-making" property, in my estimation, is that God be trustworthy. This is more valuable than that he be

omnipotent (for reasons that may be obvious). I think the ethos of God that we could assume with more confidence given the Trinity, that he really gets what it's like to be us and doesn't put himself above us (rather than the one following from something like classical theism minus the Trinity, which doesn't establish that, or not as clearly), makes God more trustworthy. Arguably a non-Trinitarian God is less likely to deserve the name "God", and instead may be simply a very powerful, knowledgeable being that may be unreliable, "insufficiently aligned".

Atonement

Bentham's Bulldog thinks that the Atonement is weird and is thus probably made up. I wonder if he believes in justice as a primitive of reality, that when someone does something wrong, the "universe itself" (the ground that takes in the blood, to use a Biblical image) cries out for things to be made right. I would guess not.

When I was younger, I didn't understand such things. But I can understand them better having been the victim beyond the point of my own ability to be patient with victimhood. From that perspective, the pursuit of justice (and related, the establishment of moral truth) seem very psychologically compelling, and what is the truth other than what is psychologically compelling? It isn't necessarily the truth, but it makes sense why we might think of it as a fundamental aspect of reality.

If justice is real, and has to be paid for, who will pay for it? Too many sins to pay for, not enough perpetrators' blood. And who isn't a perpetrator? Many of us will have to be destroyed to ease the cognitive dissonance of morality itself, and maybe if there was some other way, we wouldn't have to be.

This could weigh heavily on a philosopher, and one way out might be through some kind of doctrine of the Atonement. The unlikeliness of the Atonement is weighed against the unlikeliness of God not providing a way out of justice. If our belief in God and justice together are strong enough, it could outweigh whatever unlikeliness there is in the Atonement as a doctrine.

Maybe justice isn't a primitive of reality. If not, it's a persuasive part of reality, and seems to have been a part of the Jewish religion. I seem to remember it being a big part of the pagan religion in the Roman Empire, at least that the practice of propitiating gods was. Between Jewish and pagan culture, Jesus' death, as Atonement, may have been necessary to resolve the Jewish and pagan cultural need for an Atonement. (Likewise, many of the people who are drawn to Jesus today through the idea of the Atonement may have a similar cultural need for it.) The Bible could contain descriptions of things that don't make sense to us now, but which were necessary for ancient people (or for contemporary people unlike us), and this would count in favor of its inspiration, not against, I would guess. It was a book for them as well as for us.

(Another take on the Atonement that I wrote, that might help, here.)

Scripture

Bentham's Bulldog makes a few claims. One that the Hebrew Bible has weird, horrifying content that God (or maybe Godly people) wouldn't write. Another that the Bible has factual errors. Another that Jesus endorses it despite that.

I will skip responding to those, although I have thoughts about them. Largely it is possible to endorse the Bible despite them. Assuming that in some sense accepting the Bible is necessary to be a Christian, I see a way to overall endorse the Bible, if not necessarily all its contents.

Here's my more general take on "in what sense could the Bible be inspired / reliable?"

There are a number of holy books. Are any of them in line with my philosophical theology? The story of Jesus may be uniquely the most in line with it (the trinitarian, self-sacrificing story). If so, then the Gospels get some credence to be the word of God. Also, the texts that are connected to that story get a bit less credence, but some, by association. (Maybe something other than the trinitarian story, like VMH, another theological argument I subscribe to, could also raise credence in some holy books, and it should do so with at least the 66 book Protestant canon, and the Hebrew Scriptures; possibly also

the distinctively Catholic, Orthodox, and LDS canons, but I don't know that not have looked into it seriously.) Connected texts being perhaps the Old Testament, seemingly endorsed by Jesus, and the post-Gospels New Testament, seemingly written by people authorized by Jesus.

There's a lot of uncertainty here, and I would assign likely less than 50% probability to any of those texts being from God. Except to the extent that they are simply poetic, narrative, etc. outworkings of ethical and metaphysical principles already contained in the two theological ideas mentioned above (MSL or VMH) or their outworkings. My concern is what to obey, how to shape my preferences, actions, and trustings, and so to the extent that these texts line up with the theology that I think has high credence, then it's easy to obey them.

They don't have to have high credence, just be more likely than any other book, for me to prioritize obeying them above their competitors.

But in cases where it's not clear, should I obey them? From my philosophical theology, I believe evil beings exist, who have been given a certain amount of freedom in the world. So maybe they have corrupted even the Bible to some extent. I'm not too disturbed by this, because perhaps in some cases I can tell what is probably Satanic for me to obey (genocide being an example), and in grey areas, I can simply say "How do I obey this in such a way

that I minimize the harm in case it's from Satan, and maximize the good that comes from it"?

One practice I have adopted from the Bible is to take one day off every week, and try to "make it holy". I don't see the harm in that, at least as far as I implement it, even if it turns out to not be from God. Someone could choose to be a vegan partially in order to keep the dietary laws in the Bible, which don't prevent eating meat, but which do make meat-eating more complicated. Keeping a law that may be God's preference, without neglecting anything more clearly God's preference, is a way to show consideration to God.

Obeying the Bible involves seeing things the way it does (that's part of the "trusting" part of "prefer, act, trust"). You have to do this with some care, deferring to what you have more warrant to believe. But I think it enables me to enter the world of the stories and the doctrinal beliefs, like installing software (particularly like a chroot in Linux), where I inhabit the worldview as though it is true. Which I think is basically what many orthodox believers do in effect, to the extent that they just "have faith" and have a background view that is sort of secular, or might be based in some apologetics that are taken to support the Bible but which are much less than the Bible in themselves. My background view is theistic, but not quite fully Christian, and then I "leap" (when I do) into the Biblical Christian identity.

I should prioritize the clearer moral claims of my philosophical theology, but in the times of my life when I can't optimize for my own consequentialism, it's good to consider the claims of the Bible, where it doesn't conflict with my natural theology. The Bible can give a kind of imaginal / narrative flesh, and spell out in a more concrete way, moral sensibilities that are inherent in my philosophical theology. Also, importantly, it may contain information about what God wants that I couldn't have derived from my philosophy or any other source.

I started a project to read through the Bible multiple times with the doctrine of God and the "uncertain obedience" of the Bible as my theme, seeing how to obey everything in it in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes benefit, from the point of view of the philosophical theology I hold, but I am not sure if it should be my highest priority right now. But maybe I'll try going back to it someday.

Conclusion

Bentham's Bulldog's post has a section on Jesus and a section on Christian apologetic arguments, which I won't respond to for the sake of time. Maybe if asked, I might try to respond another time.

For a more extensive, but somewhat disorganized and perhaps sometimes superseded explanation of my philosophical theology, one can read my blog *Formulalessness*.

An Architecture of MSL/VMH Reform

11 May 2025

This post could be for a wider audience.

As I've extended my philosophical and theological writing project, I've come to the point where I might consider in a more concrete way what would happen if it was actually adopted. This is my current guess at what an MSL, voluntary millennial holiness (VMH), ethical theism (ET) (MSL/VMH/ET) reform movement would look like, primarily within Christianity. A different question which I address a bit in this, and also have already done so, scattered around in various other writings, is what a free-standing MSL/VMH/ET religion would look like, that is, one which did not rely on any traditional religious texts or traditions. (I recommend you read the links in this paragraph before continuing, if you haven't already.)

I will mention that, while often in my writing I can go either to some kind of logical principle or my personal experience, here I will be going beyond my experience sometimes. So my thoughts here may not be as reliable as I would like. But they can be taken as suggestions. Particularly I am not certain about my understanding of history or the state of the church now.

Who Might be Reformed?

A long time ago, the Catholics and Orthodox split. Then, later, the Lutherans split from the Catholics and very soon after, the Reformed, Anglicans, and Anabaptists did as well -- the "Protestant Reformation". Later the Methodists, Restorationists, and Pentecostals established themselves and drew members from other denominations. Generally speaking, all these reformers were Christians intentionally trying to imagine a better Christianity. They could be called "endogenous" reformers.

Another "Reformation", besides the "Protestant Reformation", could be the "Secular Reformation". Deists and atheists in the 18th and 19th century (and even some convinced Christians) produced ideas that ended up undermining the authority of the Bible and the church. This "Reformation" continued to this day. It being to some extent an "exogenous" reform, caused by those outside the church.

An exogenous reform can motivate a church to change by threatening the church's survival, and also by introducing ideas that it adopts, without necessarily changing its core identity. I'm not sure I could prove this 100%, but the sense I get is that modern-day Catholicism is more Lutheran in spirit than it was right before the Protestant Reformation. But the Catholic Church hasn't simply converted to Lutheranism. Perhaps the shift in spirit being partly caused by Luther. The "Secular Reformation", I think, took away much of the church's intellectual

authority, and made it so that the church had to appeal to "seekers" and lay members more. In places where people could choose what church to go to, like the US, there was already the sense that you could choose "what" kind of Christian you were, introducing competitive market dynamics where churches might try to, and might have to, appeal to the "customer", a consumer. But now there was the added question of if even "that" you should be a Christian. People were even more able to opt out of a given church, by opting out of church itself, and perhaps this led churches to try even more business-like and entertainment-based ways of drawing them in.

I think churches on the losing end of reforms can sometimes recognize some benefits as a result of them, nonetheless. For instance, the Secular Reformation probably weakened the power of abusive churches. There are still abusive churches out there, but it's somewhat easier to say "no" to them and leave, when you can just say "no" to Christianity as a whole. Having lived in the "post-church-and-Bible-authority" (/ postmodern) world my whole life, I have a distaste for the business-like, entertainment-based, hedonism and preferentialism forms of Christianity that exist, but on the other hand, sometimes the "customer" is right, and maybe churches don't have as much reason to take their members for granted as they might have when "everyone knew" that God existed and the Bible was his word.

The MSL/VMH/ET reformation would be one that tries to address problems of intellectual authority (is there a knowable moral truth?) and the possibility of abusive churches. Also it would seek to counteract the spirit and practice of compromise within church. (Thus opposing the most obvious problems of conservative churches (abusiveness) and liberal and moderate ones (lukewarmness).) Also it would seek to be a reform of secular culture.

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MSL, as presented in the MSL booklet, is a relatively simple, concrete proof of the existence of God. Is it persuasive, that is, sound? That's a question that I probably can't answer by myself at this point. I think it is, whenever I think about it. But maybe under pressure it would be proven false? I don't think it's possible to lower its credence below a certain percentage. I think this percentage might be high enough to make it worth obeying, even if it might be false. If so, practically speaking, we should see things and act as though MSL is true. (It depends on the competitors to it in probability space.) Ruling out the possibility that God exists, I feel, is impossible, because it's always possible that everything is conscious experience, and that there is one being that experiences everything, which would be God, as in the M argument (see MSL booklet). So as a society we could search for the truth freely and rigorously, knowing that MSL will be proved enough to make it worth living

according to it, so we will have a stable ideology, even if our truth-seeking produces much to disturb us. As a theistic society, we can seek the truth wherever it leads, knowing that we will have a stable, theistic ideology.

However, as far as I can see, the percent likeliness that MSL and VMH are true may be proved high enough that a more enthusiastic pursuit of them can be motivated, something closer to certainty.

If people believed through this more strongly that God existed, this would be a "reformation" (change in teaching), or maybe better yet, a "revival" (change in spirit), because MSL isn't very different from what I guess is many Christians' concept of who and what God is. It does contradict classical theism. But most people aren't that into classical theism as such, and I would not guess that classical theism was true if I simply read the Bible.

VMH is the more "reformational" element. I believe that it gives a better intellectual foundation for seeking conversion and holiness than existing theologies. There are some Christians, I think, who already subscribe to a form of VMH (some Orthodox, and LDS), and they don't seem radically motivated to be Christian, no more so than any other denomination. (At least, if they are, it's not to the level that I would hear about it, someone online a lot, somewhat connected to religion discourse.) Maybe what's "really" needed is revival, not just that we believe that God exists, but that we care about the world. Evangelical culture (in this case, and usually in this post, the culture

that is concerned about the lostness of the lost, more so than the meaning of "good news-based") more truly approaches the revival of having God's heart, of caring about the world. But the problem with evangelical theology is that it undermines itself in practice, through "wretched urgency". Optimizing for conversion, fearing the end of life or the end of the world very soon, unexpected, or at the latest around age 80, which is the last chance for salvation, we are tempted to sacrifice psychological health and holiness in order to "reach the lost". People need to care about holiness, we recognize, but that doesn't make sense with narrow conversionism, where conversion is not to a life of holiness, but rather to a minimal state of being saved.

VMH enables us to care about the lost, care about holiness, and believe that a sane, loving God would bring us into existence and have a knowable plan for how we could come to him as kin. I don't think that in practice we care about the lost, outside of the evangelical world, nor care about holiness in much of the church, especially not pursuing it with the expectation of having to go all the way, nor know how it is that there is a plan for our salvation such that it makes sense that some may be lost, thus that we need to do something to help them not be lost. (People are lost if they don't hear about God -- but then why does he let so many not hear about him, through no fault of theirs? VMH says that they can hear in the Millennium. They are lost, but not hopeless -- God isn't

making an unforced error, throwing them away without having a plan to reach them.)

Perhaps evangelism, holiness, and the sense of God's soteriological plan are "on the books" in some sense, but we don't really get them, and I think a big part of that is that our soteriology doesn't really make sense. The Christians who may become VMHers "on the books" can be motivated to take it seriously, recognizing it as valuable. The others could have the spirit of saving the lost, but their own theologies undermine that, and conversion to VMH would open them up to having the spirit in a greater amount. So then, MSL and VMH could enable Christians to be real Christians who engage with the real world, producing a real Christianity.

(Perhaps VMH can be "ported" to other religions. In descending order of likelihood in my estimation right now: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. If it can be adopted by Muslims, it could shift Muslim culture away from conservative control and toward dialogue, which could ease global tensions and favor reason in religious discussion. Reason in religious discussion might favor Christianity, but would also allow Christians to question some of their own culture, in the light of Muslim perspectives. Widespread adoption of VMH in both Christianity and Islam would reduce the need to convert and defend against conversion.)

Ethical theism could be seen as supporting VMH, but also reforming our image of God and how we relate to him,

producing a greater level of maturity. VMH should also produce greater maturity. Ethical theism may help with relating to the secular Western world where care for those harmed or those potentially harmed motivates ethics.

MSL and VMH allow people to increase the amount that they take Christianity seriously (or possibly other religions) further without it not making sense. So it allows people to encourage themselves and each other further.

So MSL/VMH/ET should produce more mature people, more "real" people, more holy people, more caring people, and could ease tensions between religions.

All those sound good, but one area of controversy might be over its relaxation of the concern that people be converted in this life (which is part of its virtue, from another perspective). I expect some Christians to reject it because of that, these being the more conservative or consistently evangelical churches. There are liberal and moderate churches that effectively or officially don't care about hell as much, and they might be more receptive. But even for them, VMH itself opens up the possibility of there being some kind of hell that actually matters, perhaps opening the possibility for the traditional view, where your eternal state is determined by what religion you adopt in this life. Then the question becomes, what's the truth? Christians seem to be able to be confident that the Muslims are wrong. According to both the Bible and the Quran, the negative consequences of choosing Christianity, or Islam, when they are false, are high. I'm

not sure 100% about Islam's perspective, but I would say those who choose wrong either go to hell or are more likely to go to hell. Yet Christians seem confident in their choice of Christianity -- presumably because they know the truth. If the truth can lead people to Christianity, it might lead them to VMH Christianity.

It also seems less likely that the very entrenched and developed denominations would adopt it, at least at first (maybe they would be influenced by it without adopting it, or some of their members would adopt it anyway). Catholic, Orthodox, and LDS churches might be slow to adopt it corporately, if ever. Perhaps similarly with Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians / Reformed. (All these, IIRC, with episcopal or presbyterian polity.) However, the more splintered a tradition is, the more likely a small denomination within it will adopt it. However, congregationalist traditions like Restorationists (Church of Christ, Christian Churches, etc.) and Baptists, and the "non-denominational" and some charismatic churches would not have denominational structures impeding their adoption of VMH.

I would guess the biggest theological objections would come from the Reformed (/ Presbyterians), Lutherans, and Baptists, who could have a problem with the "holiness" part of VMH. (Also, for the Reformed and Lutherans, the denial of predestination.) I'm not sure how much the culture of liberal Protestantism might impede the adoption of MSL/VMH/ET, and I could see it being an obstacle, but

I think it might also be a fertile area. (I don't know enough about Anabaptists, Quakers, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, or any of the smaller denominations to say anything right now.)

MSL/VMH/ET, all three components together, or individually, could work both as things integrated "endogenously" into existing denominations (by that I mean organized bodies like the PCUSA or Southern Baptist Convention) or traditions (by that I mean families of denominations, like Presbyterians or Baptists), or by being a force existing in religious culture outside of existing denominations and traditions, influencing them without them adopting them, could be "exogenous" forces pulling people out of them and motivating them to change internally. This "pulling people out" does not sound entirely pleasant for the groups losing people (and possibly not for those leaving or even accepting them).

How should MSL/VMH/ET people approach the Christian church, practically?

1. Work with the momentum, nature, and comparative advantage of existing cultures and institutions. For instance, evangelical churches are comparatively better at having purpose and urgency. They have an energy and effectiveness. Conservative churches are comparatively better at preserving specific doctrines and practices from change, as though they are books -- useful when read.

Liberal churches are comparatively good at being a break from purpose, urgency, and doctrinal purity. For those who burn out on evangelical and conservative churches, liberal churches can provide a place to rest, process, and vent. Each of these three types of churches may have a tendency to exaggerate itself. Evangelical churches may burn out the people who would have made them less-evangelical. Liberal churches may end up being "evangelical and conservative in reverse", their own unbalancedness reflecting the unbalancedness of the evangelical and conservative. (The liberals have to be unbalanced to provide a safe space for the victims of evangelical and conservative unbalancedness -- some of these victims (or survivors) couldn't handle even a balanced church. And perhaps the conservatives and evangelicals have to be unbalanced in reverse, due to the existence of the unbalanced liberals who are a threat to orthodoxy.) One more type of church is the moderate church. It may mix two or three of these other types, and possibly has no comparative advantage other than being less unbalanced. It may be balanced, but have no clear direction, unlike the other three. This lack of clear direction and culture may "burn out" some members of moderate churches (although the metaphor of "burning" might be less apt since they are lower-intensity environments), sending them in more extreme directions.

So if you are a "VMHer" (an MSL/VMH/ET person, emphasis on VMH), you might realize that these churches all have their place. As long as these churches have their

failure modes, they generate the need for each other. In a way, VMH aims to be a less unbalanced, less unhealthy, less unholy evangelical religious movement, or a more intense moderate religious movement (which might end up being the same thing in some cases). But it's unlikely that everyone will belong to a VMH church and in the meantime it may be appropriate for VMHers to attend the churches that are out there, as missionaries. And as missionaries, they should respect that (generally speaking) these churches are each fulfilling a necessary function, a function which may require them to be somewhat out of tune with MSL/VMH/ET. In an ideal world, there would be no need for out-of-balance churches to balance out other out-of-balance churches, but it's good that it's possible for there to be such compensatory churches, because it's always possible for "the right kind" of churches to go out of balance / go bad / etc. Since I don't have experience with being a VMHer missionary to a church, I can't say too much more. But I think that radically changing the nature of a whole group to fit MSL/VMH/ET may be a bad idea, and I don't think it's a good idea to try to wage war on these natural types. The VMHer hopes that in the Millennium, the deficiencies of misguided churches can be ameliorated, and in the meantime, it is better to make them more "practically VMHer" while still openly being conservative, evangelical, moderate, or liberal, so that openly they can provide a safe haven for those repelled by the other groups.

One way to do this is to find the disaffected people, the people who might leave a church, and tell them about MSL/VMH/ET. VMH especially allows people to be balanced and intense, and thus may keep them from needing to seek a compensatory church. I see the culture of MSL/VMH/ET as being a missionary culture: self-reliant, outsider, observant of different cultures, "third culture". So a "missionary" is someone who can remain in adverse cultural situations, where they don't really belong anymore. I think a moderate amount of "pastoral" work within non-VMH churches could be good, something to highlight from within the logic of the non-VMH church how people can be more "practically VMHer" (more holy and more open to coming to believe what is actually true, whatever that turns out to be, another move of avoiding hardening).

2. The role of the missionary never ends. Even if all churches are VMH churches, congregants are missionaries to their own churches. They both belong and don't belong. A congregation (and maybe also a denomination or tradition) has a tendency to lose its spirit over time and gradually (or maybe not so gradually) shed members, like a fading ember. Missionaries observe their own cultures and try to bring reality to them. The words of MSL/VMH/ET might be good, but do we really mean them when we say them? Sometimes it's probably okay not to focus too much on that particular problem, but the problem will recur over and over, and perhaps never finally come to an end. So there should be some vigilance.

We each are missionaries sent by God to whatever social contexts we are part of, including our own "mother" congregations, VMHer though they may be, and to our own families, VMHer though they may be. We individually report to God first, then to our social contexts. This opens the possibility of excessive and inharmonious individualism, but I think if we stick to MSL/VMH/ET, it should give us the necessary moderateness and patience to keep us from becoming excessively discordant. If we are wise, we will not go against our social contexts unless we have reason to think we know better, and this thought filters some tendency to excessive and inharmonious individualism. Unwise people will fail, some of them no matter what you say to instruct them, and individualism can empower unwise people, but I think it's important to err a bit on that side, so that VMH churches (or maybe non-VMH ones, if they're receptive) do get the feedback when they're doing something wrong, and people do take responsibility for their own engagement with church culture, the way a lone missionary has to.

3. VMHers in leadership roles, especially in VMH churches, need to be able to listen to the criticism of individuals who may offer ways to keep the system from running down. However, there is a division between "structure" roles and "change" roles. "Structure" makes sure that there is a body of believers, which we can call a church. (Similarly with other institutions.) "Change" is responsible for what the body is. Structure tends to be

conservative, inclusive, and dependable, typically to create one big harmonious body of people. Structure people might be incentivized to try to keep the money coming in to pay the pastor and maintain the building, in a typical congregation. They may strive to care about people's change into really holy people. But they can't take risks, they are often over-stretched for time, they can't offend too many people, and they have to keep their personalities basically centered, thus fit for certain people and not for others. "Change" people, ideally, are out of the leadership loop, can just leave a church if things go bad, have less concern for offending people and if they offend someone they are not taken to be very representative of the church as a whole, and they can be as individual and idiosyncratic as can be (fit for just one sheep and not for any of the ninety-nine). Such people can prioiritize holiness, truth-seeking, etc. Perhaps VMHer church leaders simply have to maintain that there is a body of people, and allow the change agents to do what they do. These change agents, if VMHer, should remain somewhat hard to detect by the structure, and should not pose a problem to the structure people's values, which ultimately converge on the change people's. (If they don't, then perhaps conflict is unavoidable.) Hopefully a VMHer structure person doesn't even have to listen to criticism, because the change people are simply making things better on their own, quietly and more or less invisibly. If it's necessary to communicate openly about a problem, the structure people should listen and then have the sometimes

difficult task of weighing whether the person offering advice should be followed in the matter. It's not like every time a change person offers advice it's good, or that if they do offer good advice it will be heeded. But at least a structure person can open channels of communication and respect criticism and advice coming from anyone in the church.

4. The church is a microcosm for society at large. VMHers may apply the thinking of how to relate to churches or other relatively small social contexts to society at large. Just as they work to keep churches from running down, promoting holiness and truth-seeking and whatever might keep people in them from hardening, so they do in the world. This may have civilizational benefits -- seeking good, self-corrective sustainability.

Similarly, the church is a macrocosm for immediate and extended families, and friend groups, especially ones that have a significant institutional component (rituals, traditions, expectations, etc.) The church is analogous to workplaces. In these areas, VMHers may apply the thinking of how to relate to church, attempting to bring about excellence and longevity, as they do in the church.

5. VMH and ET are potentially powerfully alienating beliefs. It depends on how seriously you take them. Some people are strongly oriented toward truth, and can't unsee things. This is part of what it takes to be a serious person in touch with reality. But this can make life difficult when you are surrounded by environments that do not change to

fit the truth. Yet, this is exactly the predicament missionaries must find themselves in. In fact, if there isn't this tension, then they are likely to be unable or unwilling to do their work, or they are in a context where they aren't really facing the unrealistic world.

To make this tension somewhat more bearable, without compromising on the truth, it can be good for VMHers to have at least some kind of space, or some set of VMHer relationships, in which their beliefs are validated by people attempting and hopefully often succeeding in pursuing VMH, other VMHers. The aforementioned VMH church idea is one way of doing this. Perhaps such a church would meet on a day other than Sunday, to allow VMHers to attend their mission churches. It would be a space of recovery, and education, to help VMHers in their work, work-oriented rest. It would not be a piece of heaven on earth, as some church services seem to try to be.

Such a church (if "church" would even be the right name for it) could exist online. MSL/VMH/ET writing would be readable by anyone who found it online. It might not be possible or practical to have a local church in every city where there is a VMHer. So at minimum there would have to be an online support system.

6. People who are attracted to new religions or social movements often (I would guess) have some kind of instability, trauma, hunger, unmet need, etc. Part of this is because often only unhappy people look to "a new

country". They have the drive to get out of the status quo. Another part of this is that, especially initially, those attracted to MSL/VMH/ET may be people who have not fit in in the status quo, because they are already "practical VMHers", fully or somewhat, and have suffered from that social dissonance, the indifference and hostility they attract. Pursuit of MSL/VMH/ET may in part (or in some cases, almost wholly) be a mechanism for dealing with some kind of personal issue. This does not make it invalid, as long as people develop a real understanding and commitment to MSL/VMH/ET. However, a person attracted to MSL/VMH/ET should be prepared to see some of this dynamic in others, and likely in themselves. Unrooted people trying to become rooted in something new just for the sake of being rooted in something, trying to pair up with each other romantically or platonically independent of VMHer work ethic, sometimes pulling each other away from what they ostensibly believe in to pursue their psychological hungers, are potential challenges that can distract from VMHer identity and belief. However, a more positive view would be that those psychological hungers can provide a lot of energy (maybe more useful in the more "how can we love?" mode, see below). And those hungers to bond and to be rooted can give energy to do good.

7. I mentioned "how can we love?" above. This is a reference to a book I wrote called *How Can We Love?*. That book is basically a particular mixture of VMH and effective altruist ideology (specifically the Drowning

Child Illustration). It has a kind of secular energy to it, and I think it can give a lot of psychological power to do good -- in other words, to work hard, pile up a kind of wealth, make things, learn things, spend the wealth, a kind of economic production. It motivated me to write for 12 years, making a kind of impersonal product, my writing. (It gave me an initial, and sustaining, push that eventually wore out.) It could also motivate activism, more confrontational and open attempts to change systems. Because I was alone with it, I never got to explore where it could lead. I never had the social support to enable me to sustain it. I found it to be intense and taxing, and at that point in my life, I would have needed a functioning religious / social movement to allow me to continue in it. Unsupported (or falsely supported, as the case sometimes was -- some of what I call "burnout" may really be "the aftereffects of psychological trauma from bad people, some of whom I tried relying on"), it eventually burned me out, as effective altruist ideology sometimes does, and as VMH apart from effective altruist ideology may sometimes prove to.

I'm not sure if I should recommend it highly or not at all. The alternative is a more purely VMHer ideology, which is more oriented toward quiet excellent sustainability, what I've been trying to write about above in this post. Is it good for people to openly confront the world, as "how can we love?" promotes with its vibe? Is it my own fatigue that causes me to say "no, the quiet way is better, don't break eggs, don't feed the discourse"? Or is it the wisdom

of being older? Is it perhaps the case that *How Can We Love?* was necessary for me to write and live by, but now that I know better, no one else needs to? Or perhaps I will wake up to *How Can We Love?* someday, and return to it. I don't know, but I think that book might be the surest way (of what I've written) to the more profound moral truth at the heart of VMH and ET, the thing that alienates you from non-VMHers if you get it, which enables you to be a more effective missionary.

"How can we love?" is maybe for culture warriors of various sorts (artists, intellectuals, activists, perhaps others), while the more purely VMHer culture is maybe for missionaries (who could be culture warriors in a sense, but are more essentially something like pastors, if not always in charge of flocks).

So then there may be a dichotomy between "movement" (openly world-confronting VMHer activity) and "religion" (quieter, smaller-scale, more peaceful VMHer activity). "Movement" and "religion" may sometimes step on each other's toes, though they seek the same goal. Some people may find themselves pulled toward both at the same time. The two could intentionally see each other as complementary, and just like men and women, might not completely understand each other. I suppose it's also possible that the two would get along with each other and flow into each other naturally.

I personally think it might be hard to enter a church as an MSL/VMH/ET missionary simply because it would be

hard to hide my 12 years of writing when talking to people. Somewhat analogously, the movement may make it harder for missionaries to work under the radar. I suppose conventional Christian missionaries, say, in a Muslim-majority country like Turkey or Indonesia, manage to work more or less quietly even though Christianity has always been a thing Islam knew about, and even many people in those countries may have some kind of real acquaintance with Christian teaching, if they are religiously curious. So maybe it wouldn't make too big of a difference in this case.

Culture war breaks eggs that maybe missionaries have to put back together. That metaphor makes it sound like the culture warriors put very little effort in, can break a warehouse full of eggs in one enthusiastic evening (maybe when they release that big blog post), and the missionaries have to do a lot of work on their end, tedious reconstruction, requiring many laborers though only one warrior launched his or her missile. There may be some truth to that. Should culture warriors try to be more responsible with their forays? It isn't good for the truth to be compromised, but otherwise, yes. There has to be a degree of irresponsibility in making information public, since you don't know what other people are going to see in it, or do with it. Yet, you can avoid unforced errors.

The advice of the Epistle of James says "not many of you should be teachers". Perhaps one could say "not many of you should be culture warriors". That's fair enough, but I

think in a democratic society, many of us want to be culture warriors. So "how can we love?" might attract many people who resonate with culture war, yet who need to learn to not be culture warriors. Fortunately, in a way, there is a natural tendency for most artists and intellectuals to live in obscurity. On a small scale, like at an open mic night, artists operate more like missionaries than celebrities, and their culture war is something that won't break a warehouse full of eggs, and they can even be the ones to reconstruct the broken eggs. "How can we love?" (and the book) doesn't have to motivate culture war, rather more essentially it's about work in the world, often in secular contexts, with a somewhat secular vibe (something I feel in it, though I am not sure I could explain why to someone who didn't also feel it). But that engaging energy probably would motivate proto-culture warriors to get even more into culture war.

In the 1960s, "bonds were broken and energy was released", like in a chemical reaction. Similarly, perhaps, in Luther's day. The Protestant Reformation and the Secular Reformation had their dramatic, explosive periods. There was noise, confrontation, passion, and controversy. But if there is a reform movement that is trying to build bonds (interpersonal trust, collective direction, institutions), or reform existing ones without breaking them, maybe it is best to be quiet, non-confrontational, maybe passionate but in a different way, and uncontroversial.

Perhaps the underlying truth of the bonds being built would be something that is really profound, the disjunction, between it and the rest of the world, greater than that between Catholicism and Protestantism, or Christianity and atheism. The job of building bonds says to avoid pressing the point. The duty to the truth, and seeing it as it actually is, a part of being truth-oriented, says to speak clearly and in a sense without pity. One way to resolve this tension is to reveal the cutting truth to people you know, and not to publish it widely. There might be some wisdom in this approach. But in a world where publishing things is very easy, as ours is in the Internet age, a dark secret that is important to a social or religious movement can't stay completely hidden for very long. It's better to have some way to be public, given that it's basically inevitable. Artists in the MSL/VMH/ET tradition would have to work on how to express this. In my music, I have sometimes tried to mix world-confronting lyrics with a sorrowful and peaceful tone, which is one approach. The bond-building and truth-speaking impulses can work together, at least to some extent.

8. MSL/VMH/ET could be seen as a "Mosaic" thing. People live in slavery to their sins. They are low-born, and have the sins of being low-born. With "how can we love?", I focused on the moral truth. This produced a sense of confidence in how I wrote. Other people saw that power without really investing in the truth that I saw.

From that, they saw me as a "leader", though that wasn't what I was going for.

People tend to want to have leaders, but not necessarily to care about what the leaders care about, nor to want to become able to bear the burdens that the leaders bear. They make a "Moses" out of them. It feels nice to have a strong-looking person in your life who will guide you and take care of you. You latch on to them, they feel responsible for you and to you, and you can get what you want. Maybe they change your mind over time, maybe they don't. But you definitely get fed, maybe for years. People seem to want a certain kind of person, with a certain kind of vibe, to be theirs. Like a woman or man who wants their spouse to be accomplished, perhaps to sing beautifully, but not to actually pursue their talent seriously. They just like their spouse to have that detail on their personal image painted in nicely -- passion, talent, and dedication as decoration.

The sheep/shepherd division is frustrating if the whole point of your movement is to teach people to become the kind of people who could lead. This is much more the goal of MSL/VMH/ET than the church as I see it. Certainly sometimes sheep do become shepherds, but sometimes sheep can drain your energy for years without changing, because they feel entitled to the food you give them. They have no intention of becoming mature, they just like being served. I feel like the church already exists for people like them, and VMHers should avoid getting sucked into

shepherding-for-shepherding's sake, when it's possible to help other people actually change. Perhaps for "structure" people, it does make sense to keep feeding people without them really changing, to hold the social structure together, but for "change" people, especially with limited resources, it's better to focus on the people who might actually listen. Where are people headed? What's their attitude toward listening and changing? What's their attitude toward truth and goodness in general? Those who will move are promising.

People will get into power struggles with you if you look like a strong, confident person. They are dealing with their own craving for status and their sense that they are not good enough. Perhaps the answer, which my future self can be wiser to adopt than my past self was, is to not appear so strong and confident. I think the quiet VMHer missionary (as opposed to the strong "how can we love?" person) might not come off as much as someone to be torn down for the sake of building other people up. You can waste a lot of time and energy dealing with people who think that you're a living confrontation to their identity and self-worth. On the other hand, at least the people who come after you because they are threatened by you care, at least in some sense. The people who are not threatened by you because they don't take you seriously, or the things you're into, in some ways are worse. (They can betray you higher on the hierarchy of betrayal.)

The Mosaic life, then, can easily be one of confrontation and broken relationships as people work out their issues with authority using you as the actor in their personal drama, and try to get psychic food out of you, try to lower you to their level, sometimes trying to enslave you, make you their own captive sheep. Maybe this is worth it sometimes? If you're making a strong public statement (what the moral truth requires in its unvarnished form), then maybe there's no way to avoid Mosaic dynamics. Maybe a more robust movement can make it sustainable by supporting the "Moseses"? I'm not really sure what to advise here. But I can attest to the costliness of the Mosaic approach.

Maybe if you are the bearer of something that seriously questions society (as MSL/VMH/ET does), even if you are skilled with people and careful and wise in your approach to life, you can't avoid the possibility of culture war and Mosaic dynamics from entering your life. But you can reduce that possibility by being more careful, wise, and skilled.

9. The energies of "how can we love?" could spill out into activity that is not really directed toward theistic ends. In a way, I could lament this, but if it has to happen it would be good in itself -- at least, I think usually -- though potentially a distraction from the theistic concerns that are really necessary. This would be a kind of "secularization" of "how can we love?".

The Pentecostals are a family of denominations, I suppose generally having started in the early 20th century. Their main claim to fame is continuationism (the gifts of the Holy Spirit coming down on people in modern times). But they tended to also have some other typical views. I think they are all Arminian, some ordain women, and I think many preach holiness doctrines. Now, as they gained in success, they helped make continuationism look attractive to non-Pentecostals. So that eventually there were such things as "charismatic" Catholics, Anglicans, and I think others, who stayed within their traditional denominations. Also there arose some churches that were not exactly Pentecostal, that were charismatic. I believe a similar thing happened with Calvinistic doctrines, where there were Calvinistic Methodists, and if Max Weber is to be believed (my knowledge of Weber comes from what I remember of his famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), Wesley himself was influenced by the Puritans, part of why he sought holiness, so that all of Methodism is influenced by Calvin. And there are of course the Reformed Baptists and Anglicans. Perhaps they are just like other Baptists or other Anglicans, except Reformed. Reformed theology is not just the Doctrines of Grace / Five Points of Calvinism, but has other features, but there are Calvinistic Baptists who are not the same as the Reformed Baptists, who simply are Calvinistic, without adopting the rest of Reformed theology.

I couldn't exactly call the process discussed in the previous paragraph as "secularization", but it resembles

secularization, the exporting of a basic doctrine, or the spirit of the doctrine as with Weber's take on Methodism, outside of the tradition that it formerly had its home in, thus not bringing with it all of the other doctrines and practices associated with it from its home environment. In its new environment, it could do strange new things (as secularized Christianity has done, again citing Weber, who attempted to show that secularized Calvinism allowed the rise of secular capitalism). Or it could do about the same as you would expect, which I would guess is often the case with continuationism and predestination, the examples above.

This "re-traditioning", we might call it, could apply to MSL/VMH/ET. How so? I've already discussed the possibility that congregationalist congregations could simply convert. Hopefully in not too painful a way. Although I don't expect this to happen too often, a presbyterian or episcopal denomination or tradition could adopt VMH officially. The Catholics, Orthodox, Methodists, and some Anglicans might not have to stretch too much of their belief system to accommodate it. The Reformed, Lutherans, and I think a lot of Baptists would not like to hear the sound of it too much insofar as it says complete holiness, significantly up to us and not God, is necessary for salvation. (I think the LDS may officially be VMH already, but may have to shift their emphasis -- and LDS soteriology and eschatology is different from mainstream Christianity and MSLianism, and I don't quite grasp how that works out practically.)

However, though (for instance) officially-VMH Catholicism or Presbyterianism seems unlikely, individual Catholics or Presbyterians who wish to may become "practical VMHers", who live as though VMH is true, even though they on some level continue to officially espouse the Catholic Church's teachings in the one case, or even the Doctrines of Grace, in the other. From a VMH perspective, this is basically OK, although it is true that explicit VMH belief is good, and potentially very powerful. The analogy of the iceberg says a bit of the iceberg is above the water, and far more beneath. Practical VMH is what is below the water, and does more good than explicit belief. But, explicit belief, if held to seriously over time, produces practical VMH, and I'm not sure what else does in as reliable a way. Explicit VMH belief allows the will and intellect to focus on the helpful doctrines that produce the habits, intentions, attitudes, etc. of practical VMH. "Unbelieving VMHers" may further the VMH project (I guess by putting their effort into promoting holiness and truth-seeking, and opposing hardening, and maybe other things that could be added to the "practical VMH portfolio") without necessarily holding to VMH itself.

Terminology

This post is somewhat provisional. One lingering question for me, for instance, is what to call things. "MSL/VMH/ET" is not quite a nice thing to say out loud, although any two out of three isn't so bad. Possibly

"MSL/VMH" is OK, because VMH and ET are discussed in the same booklet. I have already written about "MSLians", who are those who base their religion on the extended MSL philosophy, rather than on traditional texts. (This "extended MSL" includes VMH and ET.) Maybe in contrast, VMHers are those who are also into MSL/VMH/ET, or at least VMH, and often MSL and ET, the emphasis on VMH rather than MSL, and they may subscribe to traditional texts, for instance through the New Wine System, the biblical system developed by Philip Brown from which I learned what I now call VMH. Perhaps this "MSLian" vs. "VMHer" distinction is sufficient to name the two approaches to MSL/VMH/ET, and this post has tended to lean toward talking about VMHer theology and practice. "VMHer" being the MSL/VMH/ET doctrine and practice for the interface between VMH and existing religions (Christianity, likely Judaism, maybe Islam, maybe others), while "MSLian" is for the freestanding philosophical religion of MSL, which is maybe best to present to those with no religion or no theism (atheist/agnostic, New Age, occult, maybe some Hindu, maybe Buddhist, undifferentiated non-religious or spiritual). Or maybe some completely different terms would be best (after all, it's the critics who sometimes get to name the movement).

What about MSLians?

Speaking of "MSLian", what would the MSLian approach to MSL/VMH/ET belief entail?

Many of the things that I say about VMHers could also apply to MSLians (and vice versa), where I'm really talking about VMH or ethical theism (this is true in this post and in others by me), or theism in general, or where the minimal or proto-Christianity of MSL overlaps with something like the New Wine System. One area of difference, though comes from how MSLians and VMHers more naturally work with different kinds of people.

It would not be wise to make MSLians try to recreate church, because their comparative advantage is to reach people (atheist/agnostic, New Age, occult, undifferentiated non-religious or spiritual) who are often ex-Christians, some turned off by the Bible, some turned off by extra-biblical Christian culture, some turned off by the specific implementations of church that are out there, and some turned off by church itself, in itself.

Personally, I find myself identifying less with the church. So I see myself being an MSLian more than a VMHer.

I'm not sure exactly what the right way to be an MSLian is. But my attempt at it is:

1. Discipline myself, cultivate myself, feed myself, turn myself, etc. to be in line with MSLianism (extended MSL like in *Formulalessness*). I want who I am to be in line with it.

2. In social situations, be myself. Exert minimal intentionality. Don't be a "master", don't be a "disciple".

Don't "be Jesus" (as much as there is demand for that). Don't impose my will or beliefs on others. But don't do things that go against MSL. Try not to intervene in others' lives, unless there is some really urgent danger (which will usually be something that makes sense from a secular perspective). But still quietly "anti-tempt" them.

From these two points maybe "everything else follows". At times, it's appropriate to share about my MSLian beliefs. I am not very good at explaining things in person (I am a writer more than a teacher), so I give out my booklets as an introduction, and if someone wants to know more, maybe I can do that over email.

I am not sure what would happen if someone I knew accepted MSLianism. I have some ideas, like that it's good to avoid dependency, turning me into a "shepherd" or "guru". Better that they be able to read the text and apply it themselves.

Generally, here and with VMHers alike, I like the idea of people being driven by their understanding. Understanding more and more, to the point that the understanding motivates their action. I have tended to avoid writing how-tos or sermons in which I tell people that they should do things, or how they should do them. Deep understanding of how the world works, where it should go, and how its parts interrelate, should show what to do and motivate learning how to do it, in its practical details.

I could see, in spaces that are explicitly MSL/VMH/ET, some kind of education in how to understand things, which hopefully should train MSLians and VMHers in how to come to understand things on their own.

The MSLian paradigm is the "scenic-discipleship polity", less established than even the congregationalist. A scene has groups of disciples who coalesce in small informal groups. In the classic, "traditional discipleship", a master leads the disciples (like Jesus with his disciples). But a different way, more endemic to MSLianism, would be "unseeing discipleship", in which whatever (inevitable) differences in experience and maturity between one person and another are maybe on some level understood, but also disregarded, because the two people are friends or family (this is what friendship and family often does naturally).

What about Institution-Building?

Historically, new religious groups have done things like found magazines and newspapers, and especially, educational institutions. I don't think there is anything wrong with there being some kind of newspaper or equivalent that ends up being read by many or most people in the movement or religion. I think that that sort of thing can arise if it is needed. However, I am not so favorable toward educational institutions. Mainly because they cost money and concentrate leadership in a credentialed elite. I think that leadership and education are

most beneficial for leaders and the educated. Even if everyone tunes out a sermon, the preacher put in a good 20 hours of study. Diffusing leadership and education seems to me like a good way to go.

However, for those, maybe VMHers, who are interested in the Bible, learning Hebrew and Greek may be best done through an institution. Similarly, for some, learning about theology may be best done through an institution. Perhaps the best way to satisfy those educational needs is to go to a seminary or Bible college of a church you might be interested in being a missionary to. This can teach you a sort of "inside knowledge" of that culture and its teachings. I suppose you probably can't actually get ordained in many or most traditions, due to significant doctrinal differences. On the other hand, having a degree from, say, Westminster Seminary (a Reformed seminary), attending a Reformed church, but not really being Reformed, might seem sort of suspicious (perhaps like you were a missionary to them?).

Other than Hebrew and Greek, I personally would probably not bother with formal education in religion. I feel like I could figure out whatever I would need if I were to be a missionary to a Christian tradition. But I'm probably more autodidactic than many people. Some kind of widespread informal culture of, say, study groups, or something like that, seems like it would be good for a lot of less-autodidactic people. Even Hebrew and Greek, I suppose, could be taught in that way, if the knowledge can

be moved out of academia. These study groups could be within the MSL/VMH/ET movement / religion, or could be outside it or somewhere in the middle, depending on what one wants to learn.

Other groups could be set up for developing artistic ability, or other skills or sensitivities that are useful in MSL/VMH.

Conclusion

I think at least for now this is as much of the architecture of an MSL/VMH reform as I can imagine.

Further reading:

I got the term "wretched urgency" from this article.

News: 1 July 2025

01 July 2025

With "An Architecture of MSL/VMH Reform", I felt done. With what? I don't think I'm completely done.

Here are some things I could work on in my writing project:
1. The philosophy may need to be fixed.
2. I wanted to write a Bible commentary relating extended MSL to the Bible. It would also try to prove some points even to non-MSLian Bible readers, through the lenses of "Who is God?" and "how do we obey God in a way that

minimizes harm in case we're wrong about what God's word is?"
3. I could always write more songs, make more albums, make them higher-quality, etc.
4. Overall, I have thought about futurism (like the topic of social sustainability), and have written some notes about it.
5. I have notes for a novel, or series of novels.
6. Those are things that I've started. But one project I thought of but haven't started up to now is to read fiction, analyzing it through the lens of MSL, particularly to retrain myself so that I see everyday life stories with MSLian values and expectations.
7. Another similar one being some kind of news analysis.
8. I could keep going with learning Indonesian and pursuing what could come from that.

Possibly there are other things I could pursue. Or maybe it's better for other people to do the things in the list instead? I think that is fairly likely with the Bible commentary, since I don't have the scholarly background to make something that is what I assume your typical Bible commentary reader would want (someone with a big bookshelf of theology and Bible books, like a pastor or academic, who would want a certain standard of scholarly rigor). At least I couldn't do it all myself. Similarly with the philosophy -- it's at a point where it needs criticism, something other people would be better at than I would be.

These days I've been working on the fiction and news analysis projects, although not very hard. Also working some on music. I study Indonesian some, at a similarly slow pace. Sometimes I feel ambitious, like I will read a lot of Indonesian texts as part of learning the language, and thus be able to interface with Islam and the developing world through that portal. And maybe someday I will be able to write books in Indonesian. Other times, those goals seem hopelessly far away. There are things I can do with sub-fluent Indonesian, I guess. It's also true that in life there are things that are long projects with indefinite chances of completion, and which you can always invest more in (always learn some more vocabulary), and learning a language teaches about that reality. I feel ambivalent about learning Indonesian, but keep it in the mix of what I do in my free time.

How Can We Love? Series Review

26 August 2025

Recently I re-read the books that I will call the *How Can We Love?* series, which begins with *How Can We Love?* and ends with *Patience*. These are the books listed on this page. As that page lays things out, I think there is a coherence to all those books as a set, and that it's reasonable to say they flow from *How Can We Love?*, certainly chronologically and biographically, and to some

extent thematically. I also read two booklets that I released in the same period (*Destruction and Beauty*, written and released around the time *The Tree With Unimaginable Roots* was initially drafted, and *Fiducialism*, which goes along with *Patience*, written at around the same time and released at the same time).

"Vignette books": The first was *Sometime in the 21st Century*. I didn't know what I was doing when I started writing it in 2015. I felt bad, in a way that I thought I could access by writing. In 2011, I had written a lot of short stories. I started writing them by instinct, writing a few lines without knowing what I was writing. Then, I would finish the short story in a more normal, rational way, seeing where the initial "vignette" pointed. In 2015, I just wrote those "vignettes", without writing a corresponding short story. There are four vignette books, *Sometime in the 21st Century*, *The Tree With Unimaginable Roots*, *Variations*, and *Silence*.

During the writing of the final volume of the *How Can We Love?* series (*Patience*), I came to feel that there was something disturbing about the process of writing so instinctively and without knowing exactly what I was writing. Perhaps I was channeling some kind of spirit? Maybe the spirits weren't always good? So I turned against that form of writing.

But then later, I felt like trying to write that way. I have some drafts of attempts to start vignette books, but I lost steam in writing them.

Vignette books (if you write them the way I did), come out of a self off its foundations (despite how the output might not always seem like it). And they might make the most sense to people who are in a similar place. Yet, perhaps they are particularly challenging reading to those who are more settled and normal.

One book, *The Tree With Unimaginable Roots*, I wrote in 11 sessions at a meetup group where we wrote for 2 hours according to the "pomodoro" style of working, 25 min. on, 5 min. off. So I drafted it in about 22 hours. I used to think it would be cool to write an entire vignette book in 24 hours straight, in front of an audience.

The others I wrote less systematically.

Non-vignette books: *Letters to People Who Care* and *Patience* are not vignette books (except a bit at the beginning of *Patience* and at one point in the middle). Of course, also *How Can We Love?*, both the part that preceded *Sometime in the 21st Century* and the part written after.

How Can We Love? is the oldest book I have published still. It has value as a starting point. I wrote earlier that it was a powerful book. I don't feel that power nearly as much as I re-read it in 2025. My current self is probably the wrong person to ask about it. But the basic ideas of it were very powerful to me when I was young. Perhaps someone who had never thought of them would be similarly moved. Yet I don't know if I would 100% recommend this book to young people, because I wouldn't

want it to be read uncritically (I don't completely agree with it), yet to really benefit from it requires uncritical or at least less-critical reading.

Maybe some other book will have to be written that captures the power of the best of the ideas of *How Can We Love?*, or maybe it's best the way it is, to keep some people from having as intense an experience as I had following it.

I think there is good food for thought in *How Can We Love?* for those living downstream of VMH and the Drowning Child Illustration, expressed in Christian language. It's not exactly what I would write now, if I could and wanted to write a fairly concise introduction to the life path of MSL/VMH, as *How Can We Love?* was an introduction to the mix of the New Wine System and EA ideology that I started my writing project with. Should such an introduction exist? Maybe. But such things are more of a popularity-seeking thing than a high-fidelity truth-seeking thing, even if they are completely accurate and non-misleading.

Do I think MSL/VMH is trustworthy enough that it's wise to popularize it? I'm not sure. I would rather see it get more scrutiny and testing before pushing hard in that direction. As it is, I think maybe it's just as well that *How Can We Love?* be an interesting perspective, to be taken with a grain of salt, based on other MSL/VMH (or outside) perspectives. *How Can We Love?* suggests a VMH-based "statement", almost a political book, asserting

a point of view to drive action. Perhaps the reader can use that skeleton to shape their own personal "statement" book, inside their own head, fleshed out with other sources.

In the *How Can We Love?* series, at this age, the parts I understood best were the most narrative, most conventionally narrative, as well as the non-fiction, although sometimes the philosophical parts, the parts requiring thought, were hard to get through. I can see vignettes and philosophy as being more alien, and maybe now my brain is becoming more conventional in terms of genre.

I also re-read *Waiting for Margot* recently, which I think belongs in a different series, goes together with *Ocean Beach* and the *Formulalessness* posts from 2019, which was a hinge year. But I think it can make sense to read *Waiting for Margot* in relation to the *How Can We Love?* series.

Waiting for Margot, like the vignette books, was written very quickly, but not quite in such a heightened, "channeling" kind of way. I think of the foundation of writing as talking to yourself, and drafting a first draft is basically delivering a monologue, talking to yourself on the page. This feels native to me. Whereas, the vignette style of writing reached out outside of me to get words. The difference, then, between "ordinary drafting" and "maybe channeling".

I don't remember clearly, but reading the vignette books, I suspect that sometimes I switched from "channeling" to "ordinary drafting" as I went along in the vignette, as I had done in the set of short stories from 2011.

Waiting for Margot and the *How Can We Love?* series books are all first drafts, with some editing done after the fact. I generally tried to keep to the first drafts as much as I felt I could, taking a conservative approach to editing. Some of the editing changes the real meaning. Errors in spelling and grammar I tried to eliminate.

For *Letters to People Who Care*, I hired Arpista Editing to do copy-editing and to consult on world-building. I can recommend working with her based on my experience. Other than that, I did everything myself. Why didn't I hire her or other people to do more copy-editing? I don't exactly remember. Maybe the world-building advice was more what I wanted? I've generally been an independent worker, and maybe the DIY approach is better symbolically.

Unless something comes up that is very important that I clear up, I won't say much if anything more about these books, following something like the "death of the author" idea. (This includes any of my fiction or side projects. I remain open to contributing to discussion about my blogs (as of now, *Formulalessness* and *Following*), particularly the worldview that they sketch out, since they are the most recent expressions of it.) When I re-read these books, I see that I interpret them differently at different ages. I see that

they do not have one set meaning. I could provide more autobiographical detail, but neither the books themselves, my memory, nor whatever unsystematic diaries or old emails I could research offer a really satisfying, non-misleading picture of what went into the books. (The things that I have published in non-fiction form about myself are generally reliable, but to get a full picture requires more information than that.) The years during which I wrote the *How Can We Love?* series were challenging, and the years following their completion were even harder for a long time (again, despite this not always coming through in my writing style or content). Whether through whatever psychological mechanism causes veterans to not talk about combat (maybe their brains just don't want to retrieve the memories of their years, as mine does not want to retrieve much of what happened over the last twelve years), or simply because I want to move along the frontier of being myself and not re-live the past (reading old books revives old spirits for a time), I mostly want to move on and not engage any more deeply to the level that could add biographical detail to illuminate what I've written.

I think that authorial intent is a good thing to consider (I am okay with that approach) but in a way, the author of these books "has died". I think if someone had interviewed me carefully back when I was writing the books, and had good insight into the life I was living, I would be satisfied with their perceptions of me, as being basically non-misleading. That could have been the biographical data,

expressing my past self apart from simply the text that remains. But I don't think the records I have plus my memory are that good. I could be wrong about the records, but I'm not going to look at them any time soon to find out.

I might find it interesting to read other people's interpretations of my books at some point. I can't fit too much in my head at once, so I'm not sure even under the best of circumstances I could really understand what I've done as a writer. Maybe only other people can really figure that out.

Recommendations, Book Review Introduction

30 September 2025

In May of this year, I felt like I was "done" writing. For the next few months, I tried to figure out what to do next. I feel now that I can focus on something, coming up with recommendations and book (movie, etc.) reviews, which are often the same thing.

There are two parts to this: a list of recommendations which I have already begun to fill out, and then here on *Following* I will put reviews as I write them. The list of recommendations will have links to my reviews.

Game Review: Hack

25 October 2025

Hack is a roguelike game (a game descended from *Rogue*), thus, it has procedural map generation, and when you die, it's permanent. *Nethack* is descended from it. I played *Hack* because it comes with the version of the bsdgames package that one of my computers has. Maybe if I had been thinking of recommending a game, I would have gotten *Nethack*, because I think it's better-known. I'm not sure exactly how much of the following applies to *Nethack*.

Hack vs. *Angband*: *Angband* is a serious, sort of industrial roguelike. Hard work and dedication (and some luck), may enable you to win. Emphasis on combat and inventory management. You can set a kind of "policy" for how you play and stick with it. Setting that policy is part of the skill of the game. *Hack* is a more luck-based, improvisational roguelike. Harder to stick to a policy because you can't control your inventory as much. Sheer number of times playing make it more likely you will eventually win (in that sense rewarding hard work and dedication), but luck is a big part of the game, as opposed to Angband's emphasis on thinking and planning (another meaning of "hard work"). Trying things out is rewarded (like the potions and scrolls that come unidentified and that you can't reliably identify). *Angband* is a world that in many ways has infinite resources. The basic consumables

you need to survive can be purchased from the town. Some other items can be purchased, and the dungeon has a lot of items, plenty of good armor, weapons, spell books, etc. You can store some items in your home for an added element of plentifulness (can keep some items for later use). *Hack* does not have infinite resources. You can run out of food. No town, no home, there are some shops in the dungeon that you might randomly encounter but not reliably. *Angband* is in some ways a better model of real life, but sometimes *Hack* is. *Angband* and *Hack* could be labels on patterns in life.

I think *Angband* and *Hack* complement each other. If I had to recommend one, it would be *Angband*. But *Hack* makes an interesting commentary on *Angband*.

JRPGs are a different perspective that also complement *Angband* and *Hack*. (I can't recommend a particular one off the top of my head.)

California Special Election 2025

28 October 2025

I haven't voted in a while, and forgot how far back that went. I knew it was before 2020, when I wrote a post about it. But then, I got something in the mail from the Voter Participation Center saying that I hadn't voted since before 2018 (apparently whether you vote is public record,

though who you vote for is not). The idea was to get me more engaged in democracy. I have my reasons for not voting. But I felt the tug of the appetite in me for being engaged.

Perhaps I look bad to the Voter Participation Center, people who are well-meaning, and I crave to look good? Maybe I really feel like belonging to California and the US? Maybe I've been taught to have this appetite for political engagement?

The election this year is about whether to gerrymander California. I don't like gerrymandering, but I'm not sure it's worth breaking my fast. Which is my higher commitment, to make California and the Democrats follow a more principled path, or to be outside the partisan system so that I can better participate in a polarized political culture?

I think my overall attitude is to somehow try to be someone who is always living in the desert, apart from human society, and yet who is active in human society. Not necessarily the desert of "asceticism against natural desires and self-will", which can be reconciled with being in society somewhat reasonably, but instead the desert of "separateness from people and their culture, non-belonging and isolation". That's more of a challenge.

Goodbye to the Public Sphere

28 October 2025

What are some reasons to say goodbye to the public sphere? (Permanently or for a while.) The public sphere being "collective decision-making at civic level and what directly feeds it" (politics, media, and amateur online "Discourse" included).

First, a big reason not to: "everything interrelates". Whatever you think is important, the bigger picture, including that discussed by the public sphere, directly or indirectly relates to it. I do think this is important, and discourages disengagement from the public sphere.

Here are two reasons for saying goodbye:

1. Politics can be more engaging than religion. We have two big industries (news media and partisan politics) that try to get us obsessed with politics. As above, politics have real eternal implications. But being obsessed with politics can lead us to overvalue what politics values. Politics tends to value secular well-being in the relative short term, not the religious and eternal. Politics is the quest for behavioral unity, with or without deeper agreement, generally involving coercion. What we impose on people has to be what we can "all" agree on, and what we tend to all be able to agree on are projects justified according to a secular worldview. We may be officially

MSLians, VMH Christians, or whatever kind of theist, officially worrying more about people's eternal salvation than their short-term, secular well-being (or than that of ourselves or our in-group), but when we are enchanted by political discussions and information, we live as though we are atheists. So to avoid the enchantment, we might disengage, even though we risk losing touch with some things that are important.

2. Politics is baggage. MSL, and particularly VMH and ethical theism, add baggage to a person, making it harder to relate to other people. (And to some extent Christianity adds further baggage.) Do we want even more baggage? Maybe it's better to be apolitical, so that we can have a few more friends.

Podcast Review: Interesting Times with Ross Douthat, and Green Wave

28 October 2025

Review

I listened to some episodes of *Interesting Times with Ross Douthat*, a podcast where Douthat interviews mostly right-wing people (or people who know about right-wing

things) to try to explain the "interesting times" of our current moment. The podcast is part of the *New York Times* organization, and so it is presumably intended for liberals to take in. It reminds me a bit of *Know Your Enemy*, Matthew Sitman and Sam Adler-Bell's podcast where they, as leftists, try to understand the right.

I find Douthat to have an interesting speaking style, a kind of command of his own mind and of a subject matter, where he can articulate ("pin on a board and see the parts of") a subject, and do this on the fly. I think this is a potentially valuable skill, and I found my own thinking moving a bit in this direction after listening a lot.

That's one possible recommendation for why to listen to the podcast. Otherwise I would recommend it as a way to listen to mostly right wing people talk about mostly right wing subjects, if you're interested in that.

One technical note about *Interesting Times*: it is one of the most aggressively mastered podcasts I've listened to. In other words, I have to turn it down the most to not bother my ears. Maybe I'm out of touch with podcasts these days and all the big names are like this, and I usually only listen to older or less-competitive ones that aren't? Part of the problem comes when switching between audio sources (i.e. switching from other podcasts). Suddenly my ears get blasted. But also, even in a world where all audio is mastered to the same "hot" level, I wouldn't like this. Loudness comes from compression, and compression

leads to ear fatigue (some of the aggressiveness of *Interesting Times*' sound may also come from EQ).

Also a related aesthetic note, that *Interesting Times* has a kind of aggressive appealingness (like many of the successful things in American culture). Like with mastering, I'm guessing this is driven by an attempt to be competitive in the marketplace of attention.

A different podcast I listened to around the same time is *Green Wave* from the *Green European Journal* (a podcast about environmentalism, seemingly largely related to politics). Unusually low volume (and a gentler sound) and harder to "plug into and relax as it takes you on a journey" (less "charismatic"?). (I think you can kind of relax when you listen to it, but it doesn't "take you on a journey".) In a way, I like and respect *Green Wave* for that more than *Interesting Times*, but *Interesting Times* was more listenable. I think partly I may be more interested in American politics than environmentalism at this point. Also *Green Wave* is as far as I heard entirely readings from articles, while almost all of *Interesting Times* is conversation, which I find more engaging. I think some of *Interesting Times*' listenability is its charisma, and charisma is not something I've totally lost my taste for.

One moment stood out from my listening to *Interesting Times*:

In the episode titled "JD Vance on His Faith and Trump's Most Controversial Policies" (or "JD Vance on Faith, Deportations, Trump's Clash With the Courts | Interesting

Times with Ross Douthat" on YouTube), Douthat interviews US Vice President JD Vance. The overall discussion covered different things, but the part that I found very interesting was around 0:41:14, or 0:40:00 (timestamps vary in different sources for the podcast): Vance says that President Trump has "better instincts about human beings than anybody that I've ever met...", "just, sort of, almost a bizarre level of intuition about people". This is something that Vance is "extremely fascinated by". Vance also was "extremely fascinated by" Trump's "humanitarian impulse".

A "bizarre level of intuition about people" and a "humanitarian impulse" in Trump, coupled with his friend (Vance) being "extremely fascinated by" him (and I could add, Trump obsesses many of his enemies to a similar magnitude) all very easily fit "Trump is a narcissist" (in the narcissistic personality disorder sense). (Trump's cruelty and fascination with beauty also fit the type.) Vance may not realize that Trump has NPD, or if somehow he falls short of the formal diagnostic criteria, at least something enough like NPD to be concerning (maybe labels aren't the point, the point is a person's energy, effect, and potential). It may also not have occurred to Vance that there might be something dark and weird about his boss, that his intuition might come from a dark source, and that his humanitarian impulse might be exaggerated for effect, an instinct that exists to make him look good and enhance his psychological power over others. Vance, to me, comes off as naive in the world of

spiritual darkness. I don't know much about Vance, but maybe he just never ran into that exact kind of dark reality growing up or in his younger adulthood.

I don't vote (for altruistic reasons), and I'm not going to say that if I were to vote, I would never vote for Trump in some hypothetical situation (it would depend on his competition). I am somewhat policy-agnostic -- I think a lot of what makes partisans think the other side is evil, and their own side good, is not collective or individual character, but just "do you subscribe to the correct (in my eyes) policy choices?" -- and I guess I'm not political enough to want to engage with that question right now. In this apolitical state, I don't strongly object to Trump's policies (although the execution of policies when it is forceful, merciless, lazy, or malicious, or something like that, is harder to excuse from an apolitical perspective). But having America run by a dark, weird person who manages to elicit intense loyalty from people who don't get how weird that is (see Trump's comment about "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK? It's like incredible."), and who elicits an almost just as weird "anti-loyalty" from his haters, does not seem like a good thing from a spiritual perspective. Worse for Trump's fans whom he captivates than for his haters, though he punishes the latter with his policies, his reward for the former. Trump, maybe somewhat on purpose and absolutely by instinct, sets himself up as a god, more so than your average US president. Spiritually speaking, he's taking large swaths of

America for a ride, wasting time and mental space they could use to get closer to God, and making them hate each other when they could have grown past that, potentially. These things significantly weigh against me voting for Trump, in the hypothetical where I was a voter and he was running again, and weighs against me voting for similar people.

There is one aspect of Trump's policy agenda that I do object to, which is his framing of it as "America first". There might be reasons why the policies that fit under that framing, if well-implemented, could be wise and beneficial. But I see Trump teaching America to be a more egoistic country, and in this, he tempts America to being mediocre and to lacking the heart of God (who "so loved the world that he sent his Son...").

But as I write this, I realize that perhaps it's unwise even to speak out against Trump, as though even his threat to people's spiritual life is a big deal when it's not really so much, given that there is the Millennium in which people can recover from him. However, this life does matter somewhat, and opposing Trump (here, for non-policy reasons) might be worth doing. But then, is it really apolitical to do so? To some extent, the political issue that divides people in America is "are you for or against Trump, the person?" apart from his platform. As a writer, perhaps I err on the side of explaining more, bringing more into the discussion (so I choose to be somewhat more political in this case), but if I weren't a writer or

something similar, I might try to keep my anti-Trump opinions to myself, if I saw a way to try to reach Trump supporters, move the conversation away from politics and toward things that are less controversial, and more eternally relevant.

Thinking about *Interesting Times* and its charisma again: imagine someone running for national office, particularly for president, a campaign trail heavily covered by media and thus heavily implicated in image and attention-getting. What's the minimum amount of charisma needed to win? Your competitors may determine that for you, in the sense that if you fall behind too much in charisma, they may defeat you. What is the automatic response to charisma -- its weirdly powerful charm and your strange trust of it -- if not mental slavery, spiritual possession, and a kind of fleshly idolatry? Losing yourself and being led by someone, trustworthy or not. To some extent we are helpless before charisma, and so it is not a sign that our hearts place someone higher than God. But it certainly tempts us to do that, to the extent that we can.

Tyler Cowen, in *Creative Destruction*, talks about how businesses like restaurants can only reach a high level of quality if there is a base of customers who are selective in their tastes and thus reward higher-quality restaurants by choosing to eat there. So the institutions are a reflection of the people they serve. If America likes pop music, pop podcasts, etc., things that grab your attention, then who else will it elect but pop politicians who control their

attention -- narcissists? So if this is a bad thing, how can Americans be trained to lose interest in products of "narcissism culture" (the shiny, the "engaging", the media that, like narcissists, compel attention and even obsession) and instead choose cultural products, and leaders, for their objective value, not based on how enchanting they are? People who choose things to listen to because *they* choose those things, rather than their instincts choosing for them.

I think about my own role, ethically, as a writer and artist, and wonder how much I myself contribute to "narcissism culture" -- the compelling, engaging, "juicy", competitive vibes. As I write this, with the 27 people besides me who follow my subreddit r/10v24 (my best metric of popularity), not all of whom necessarily read my writing in any depth, I can believe that I may not be "compelling, engaging, etc." But if I think that an alternative to "narcissism culture" should be more widespread, how can it become such without becoming more narcissistic? Its songs, for instance, initially easygoing and free-will-eliciting, like *Green Wave,* but then becoming more sweetened, "cooler" in a social sense, more electric, more addicting, like *Interesting Times*, just to "get the message out there". The danger that "what you win them with is what you win them to", that good truth packaged in a way that says subtextually "actually ignore this" doesn't get the job done. Maybe what's more realistic is that people have to see through "narcissism culture" and then they are able to move on and value more substantive things. But I

wonder if there is a way to help people to see through it faster.

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One idea inspired by an episode of *Green Wave* ("Reclaiming Time"): Capitalism makes us so engaged, competitive, tired, that we don't have the mental space and time to think of and enact alternatives -- and this is a form of social sustainability. In other words, although capitalistic engagement and continual economic growth are not personally and ecologically sustainable, capitalism seemingly protects itself from being "uninstalled" by being so engaging, and this makes it a stable form of political and economic organization, as long as it can tap into enough labor and natural resources (but these can be finite in the short run, and in the long run there has to be a limit to capitalism's growth, at least). A dark possibility: a social system simply disables humans' ability to change it, reduces people's humanity. Capitalism isn't always like this, but also maintains its social sustainability by seeming like a good thing to people, offering them rewards that they buy into. A challenge for more human-respecting sustainability would be to allow people free will and yet somehow those people won't use their free will to dismantle that sustainability.

I see a connection between "narcissism culture" (charismatic culture) and capitalism: engagement, compulsion, commanding attention and allegiance, quieting (within the mind and from without) independent

thought and will. Narcissists and capitalism try to turn you on, both pleasurably and punishingly. Both are spirits of dominance. Yet we seem to need them? How could we live without engagement and competition? Do we really want to go back to the pre-capitalist world, if that's the alternative? Or to somehow eliminate charisma, a probably omnipresent part of human societies? Maybe there is a real challenge here, to think of how to minimize capitalistic and charismatic energies, while still managing to be engaged and productive. Perhaps the key word is "slavery": are you your own master (who is then able to acknowledge the good), or are you a slave of capitalism and its political analogue (the system of amassing social influence competitively, sometimes known as "democracy")? Do you exist?

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Episodes of podcasts listened to:

Episodes of *Interesting Times with Ross Douthat*:

(I found these episodes on YouTube and Podbean. Episode titles are for Podbean.)

"He Believes America Should Be a Theocracy. He Says His Influence Is Growing" (with Doug Wilson)

"Ezra Klein Is Worried -- But Not About a Radicalized Left" (with Ezra Klein)

"Can the Catholic Church Quit the Culture Wars?" (with James Martin)

"Is 'Toxic Empathy' Pulling Christians to the Left?" (with Allie Beth Stuckey)

"How the iPhone Drove Men and Women Apart" (with Alice Evans)

"What if There's No Way to Stop Trump's Approach to Power?" (with Jack Goldsmith)

"The Grand Strategy Behind Trump's Crackdown on Academia" (with May Mailman)

"The DOGE Alum asking if Foreign Aid is America's Problem" (with Jeremy Lewin)

"What Makes Art 'Left-Wing'?" (with Tony Gilroy)

"JD Vance on His Faith and Trump's Most Controversial Policies" (with JD Vance)

"I was set to interview Charlie Kirk. Then he was assassinated." (Douthat monologue)

"Amy Coney Barrett Is Looking Beyond the Trump Era" (with Amy Coney Barrett)

"The MAGA Women Dress Code" (guest audio from "The Opinions")

(Two episodes I listened to not so recently:)

"Ross and Ezra Klein Discuss Trump, Mysticism and Psychedelics" (with Ezra Klein)

"A Mind-Bending Conversation with Peter Thiel" (with Peter Thiel)

Episodes of *Green Wave* listened to:

(I found *Green Wave* episodes here.)

"The Cities Feeling the Heat"

"Green housing threatens affordability, but it doesn't have to"

"Enemies of Society: How the Media Portray Climate Activists"

"The Women of Ventotene"

"A recipe for survival"

"Health vs. Wealth? Political Choices in the European Health Union"

"Light, Air, Sun, Carbon Neutrality: Greening Vienna's Social Housing"

"Green Class Struggle: Workers and the Just Transition"

"Reclaiming Time"

About Book Reviews

10 November 2025

What am I trying to do with the book reviews here? I think I'm often trying to provide young people (or those not-

very-experienced in whatever subject area who want to know more) with an introduction to interesting ideas, images, perspectives, etc., especially ones helpful for adherents of MSL/VMH. What this means is that I don't necessarily figure out if the sources are totally accurate (or as "totally accurate" as it's reasonable to expect of books) (they may be my only sources on their topics), which means that if you are seriously interested in a book I review, you probably should read more books on the relevant topic.

I see books, both fictional and non-fictional, useful for their non-fictional value (what they say about the world "as it is", in the public sphere's eyes, perhaps; what we normally mean by "non-fiction") and their fictional value (how they energize us to see what we already basically know or can come to know by reflection on our own experience, the ideas, images, and perspectives they suggest; what I see as the value of fiction).

I don't feel qualified to be a very confident judge of "non-fictional" content of books. Fiction books obviously raise questions about their non-fictional value, and non-fiction books are often wrong (by mistake, through motivated reasoning, or sometimes deception) and are necessarily not going to provide all of the truth (they only have a certain number of pages to work with -- if they are exhaustive, it will be in a narrow area), and often another non-fiction book of apparently equal trustworthiness will

disagree -- leaving the reader to have to sort out both books' claims.

But the "fictional" value, the possibilities opened up by considering what if the book is true, or things like that, is more what I can judge, and more what I can promise the books recommended here offer.

To a certain extent, these book reviews are an opportunity for me to write my thoughts about the underlying topics they address.

For books that rely on plot (definitely fictional narrative works -- novels, short stories, and some poetry / song lyrics, etc. -- but also maybe some non-fiction narrative -- memoirs, some journalism, etc.) I will try to respect the desires of those who want to avoid spoilers. I will try to make my points without discussing plots in depth, but when it seems necessary to do so, I will encode the text that contains spoilers in "rot13". This looks something like this:

Sbe obbxf gung eryl ba cybg (qrsvavgryl svpgvbany aneengvir jbexf -- abiryf, fubeg fgbevrf, naq fbzr cbrgel / fbat ylevpf, rgp. -- ohg nyfb znlor fbzr aba-svpgvba aneengvir -- zrzbvef, fbzr wbheanyvfz, rgp.) V jvyy gel gb erfcrpg gur qrfverf bs gubfr jub jnag gb nibvq fcbvyref. V jvyy gel gb znxr zl cbvagf jvgubhg qvfphffvat cybgf va qrcgu, ohg jura vg frrzf arprffnel gb qb fb, V jvyy rapbqr gur grkg gung pbagnvaf fcbvyref va "ebg13". Guvf ybbxf fbzrguvat yvxr guvf:

To decode the text, you might use a website like rotencoder.com or another rot13 encoding/decoding site.

Book Review: Fundamentally by Nussaibah Younis

10 November 2025

Fundamentally, by Nussaibah Younis, is a novel about someone (named Nadia) recruited to be an aid worker without deep preparation, fleeing the end of a bad relationship, who goes to Iraq to help de-radicalize women, and has adventures there. (This is my slightly misleading "non-spoiler" plot summary.)

I had a lot of thoughts reading this, but unfortunately, I don't know if I can use them, because this is a novel, and particularly a comedic novel, and so I don't know how realistic it is, having never been an aid worker myself. The author says, in her "Author's Note" at the end, that she strove for "authenticity in character, emotion, and theme" but sometimes "sacrificed accuracy in setting and context". And then she says later:

> You'll find plenty more evidence in the book that it's a work of fiction, but where I have deployed significant artistic license, I have done so deliberately and in service of the broader themes of the novel.

If this book is basically accurate (just a little cooked-up to make it a "good read"), then it could be a good resource for young people trying to decide if aid work is for them. I considered a career in international development when I was young (got a degree in it), and I probably could have used a book like this. (Although the work I was apparently being educated to do was different than what Nadia does, I would guess a book like this would still have helped me be prepared for secular humanitarian culture and dealing with officials.)

I don't want to make this book sound like a handbook for dealing with aid culture and local (in this case, Iraqi) culture, as it does not go into too much detail, but it would have been eye-opening to me simply to be made aware of the basics of how much both aid culture and developing world cultures are not like that of a middle-class person growing up in the West, particularly not that of someone raised in the church. Either I would have said "no, this doesn't sound like a good career path", maybe switched majors or something like that, or I would have said "oh, wow, this is messed-up and hard, I need to start thinking of all the ways I would need to deal with how messed-up and hard it is".

In my own life, I ended up somewhat inexplicably veering away from international development, without a book like this, so maybe it didn't matter in my case. But I think for people similar enough to my past self, either saying "no, not for me" or "wow, I need to be serious and prepare" is a

good thing, better then ending up on the field unprepared, burning out, messing up the program, getting fired, etc.

But as valuable as this book could be if known to be accurate, if I was an 18-year-old I would not really know how accurate it was. Fiction is a great way to energize the mind, to see what it already knows. But, since it's made-up, it doesn't reliably tell you what you don't already know. I would say this to any 18-year-olds reading this review -- these are the parts that sound fairly plausible to my 38-year-old self that I would emphasize (maybe in a way I have to be an authority along with Younis here, my interpretation is offered to validate Younis' suggestions). These are things that make a lot of sense to me, that the world would work like this, not that I actually 100% know that they obtain in the real world:

> 1. Aid workers are sometimes driven by personal psychological needs, not simply altruism. Some have a psychological need to do good that's really a form of therapy for themselves, some may just want a job and not really be that altruistic.
> 2. Aid work is stressful and goes wrong.
> 3. Local cultures may well want to benefit from aid workers, but they do not necessarily want to go along with whatever program aid workers want.
> 4. Secular aid workers turn to sex, alcohol, and other drugs to deal with stress (so if you don't want to do that, how will you deal with stress?)

5. Aid agencies are bureaucracies with red tape. Getting things done is political.
6. (less sure about how much I would emphasize this one:) The upper levels of organizations tend to attract "elites". "Elites" are people adapted to having power, to being powerful, often without much of a check. Elites live in a small world where everyone knows each other and the personal dimension of life is more significant ("it's not what you know, it's who you know"). "Middle class" culture (where the reader may come from, as I did) is more about "merit" (performing, obeying the rules, being evaluated more or less objectively). Being a middle class person in an elite culture may not be effective. Adapting to elite culture could cause you to compromise your middle class (possibly, your actually good) values.

This list of six items may seem a bit dry, like it won't stick in your mind. The value of reading *Fundamentally*, in part, is to dramatize these things, make them emotionally powerful, or at least more powerful. If you're the kind of person who can get caught up in a story, it can help you think more deeply about the basic dynamics of the life pattern the story talks about.

With any fiction, you can let the book energize you and you can generate a lot of scenarios based on it, and ask yourself how you would deal with them. Even if the book plays up certain things for laughs, could you handle those

exaggerated versions of some dynamic or character type? What about the less-exaggerated versions of those dynamics or character types (or of the physical setting, like the heat in Iraq)? You can do this even if you don't have any idea how much the book is rooted in reality. If you go through all these scenarios, you may be better prepared if you decide to go ahead, or maybe even the thoughts will help you be prepared in some other area of life. Possibly you can tell from even an exaggerated book that a life path is not for you.

Of course, if you're really serious about a career in aid work, you should probably see if you can find other resources to help you decide whether to go into it and what it would be like. For instance, memoirs, or some kind of study of aid workers and aid work (similar, perhaps, to Holly Berkley Fletcher's study of missionary kids in *The Missionary Kids*). I tend to be underread and to compensate by thinking a lot, but that's probably a better life strategy for a writer than an aid worker, and you might be better off looking for a lot of sources on a career you might pursue. That all may sound obvious to many readers of this post, but was not so obvious to my 18-year-old self.

As much as I have emphasized that aid work is not for everyone, I think it is something that does not have enough good people in it. (Certainly that's what *Fundamentally* makes it look like.) Aid work gets a bad reputation as wasteful and corrupt. That can damage the

reputation of altruism itself, which could keep people from coming to have the heart of God, which is essentially altruistic. (Good people going into aid work can marginally make it less wasteful and corrupt, and perhaps certain good people with a plan might be able to reform it overall.) From experience, I know that people can sometimes endure what they don't think they can endure, and accomplish what they don't think they can accomplish -- if they have to. So perhaps I would discourage someone from turning away from aid work (or similar intense altruistic work) if it looks hard -- not absolutely, in the sense that it's never a good idea to choose a different path, but relatively, in the sense of saying to many people considering it "see if you can make it work -- not everyone ever feels any call to do this work, but you do". The need is real, it's not for everyone, but some people can handle it even though it looks hard. But, definitely I would say "it doesn't hurt to be more serious and prepared".

I could definitely see there being a better book out there than *Fundamentally* for what I'm trying to get out of it. But this is what I have for now.

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Nadia disturbs me with her hungry lust, anger, obsession, and aggressiveness in trying to deconvert a Muslim woman. I was haunted by Nadia after reading the book. One perspective is just that she's immature, and has been through a lot. Maybe that excuses her? Maybe not. If it

does, it doesn't make her any less dangerous or unreliable than her example shows.

A comedy book like this will want to portray folly, and play up the follies of aid work. I think that wisdom comes often from sensitivity, and sensitivity often goes with being prone to being overwhelmed by things. Maybe the young and foolish are exactly the right people to do things like be aid workers over the short term in uprooted parts of the world. They are more suited for that. (The kind of people suited for war zones, perhaps, create their own war zones.)

If you're too old for that kind of thing, could there still be room for you in a developing country doing something altruistic? Maybe so. Someone could move to another country, one that is not currently in a war zone (but in principle, any country can become a war zone if the right/wrong things happen). Then, they try as best as possible to become not just an ex-pat, but an immigrant (someone who has really moved to a country deeply), yet retaining their foreignness at the same time, never completely fitting in. From this vantage point, a person could spread MSL/VMH religious views if appropriate, anti-tempt, solve certain secular problems within reach, but first, build relationships with people over time and develop a deep understanding of the culture. This would be kind of the opposite of the approach UNDO took in the book. No timeline, probably best without being supported by an organization needing to justify spending on you

(and thus demanding legible results), just you being a person. Still harder than living in your home country, but not as stressful as what it looks like aid work is from *Fundamentally.*

Who could financially afford that kind of life? Some people manage to be ex-pats, so they could. Maybe people who do remote work. Maybe other people can manage something like this if they retire early.

Book Review: The Missionary Kids by Holly Berkley Fletcher

10 November 2025

The Missionary Kids, by Holly Berkley Fletcher, is about missionary kids (MKs) and evangelicalism. I would recommend reading the book to get a perspective on involving children in serious altruistic work. (Fletcher is not favorable to people with minor kids becoming missionaries.) It could also be a good book to read to see the intersection of evangelicalism, missions, exvangelicalism, narcissism, and culture war. Fletcher, an exvangelical MK, shows the dark side of missions, something good to know about.

MSL/VMH could be an improvement on evangelicalism and exvangelicalism, in that its relatively patient approach

to reality avoids some of the combativeness in those two cultures when they focus on "salvation is decided in this life". VMH affirms evangelicalism partially, but offers much more time in which people can be saved, taking the edge off its "wretched urgency" (which could be upstream of its combativeness, suspiciousness, insularity, and bad consequentialism).

MSL/VMH could be a good foundation for a life of altruism, including missions, and its adherents may want to consider the ramifications of that, the ways it can go wrong.

Formulalessness Ebook Release

21 November 2025

I decided to make an ebook version of *Formulalessness*. It's available now as PDF, EPUB, and HTML. The HTML is a .zip archive with the full HTML version and source files for making the HTML, PDF, and EPUB versions.

The idea of this is mainly so that people can read through from start to finish, use ereaders, and perhaps print out the PDF, or parts of it.

2025 to 2026

31 December 2025

This year, I feel like I didn't get a lot done that's public. I did write two albums, which may be public someday. I did a "tour of duty" on Substack, then decided that it wasn't for me, that I was online too much in general.

One thing that I found on Substack was the Samuel Richardson Prize, a prize for self-published fiction set up by Naomi Kanakia. I submitted *Waiting For Margot*. As of today, it has neither been accepted nor rejected for the first level of recognition, being named a finalist.

One thing that felt momentous was the release of "An Architecture of MSL/VMH Reform" here on *Following*. I feel like I finished something.

Over the past three years (2023, 2024, 2025), I have been "wrapping things up", like re-reading *New Wine for the End Times* and reading *Formulalessness* in 2023, and making the MSL booklet in 2024. This year, I re-read my fiction and also made the *Formulalessness* ebook editions. I don't know of anything else left to do for "wrapping things up".

I did not spend much time out in the local social scene in San Diego in 2025.

I kept going back and forth on Indonesian. I made a demo of "Pacuan Dengan Matahari" (translation of "Horseback Racing the Sun" into Indonesian). As of today, I feel ambivalent about studying Indonesian but would bet that I will continue.

Last year in "2024 to 2025" I mentioned a feeling of fatigue. It was sort of the "ground note" of 2024. In 2025, at the end, I don't feel tired, I think having given up the project that we'll say ended with "An Architecture of MSL/VMH Reform". But now, I lack the ability to study in a heavy way, or work on most of my writing. This year, I did get into doing book reviews, which seem to require less deep thinking. Yet now at the end of the year, I seem to be taking a break from that.

2026

I'm not sure what I will do in 2026. One thing that seems obvious is to "rest" (work on things that I'm not tired of). As above, I think I will probably keep studying Indonesian, although I'm not sure about that. Also will probably keep writing albums. Possibly a few book reviews.